

# interzone

SEPTEMBER 1999

Number 147

£3.00

## 'Where Does the Town Go at Night?'

Tanith Lee

plus stories by

Francis Ameru

Christopher Kenworthy

Garry Kilworth

Richard A. Lupoff



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Interview with SIMON INGS • NICK LOWE reviews recent films

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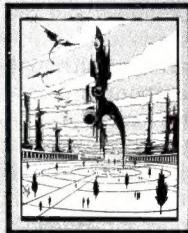
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217 Preston Drove, Brighton BN1 6FL,  
United Kingdom.

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review, and enquiries about advertising  
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**Subscriptions:**

£34 for one year (12 issues) in the UK.

Cheques or postal orders should be  
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Overseas subscriptions are £40,  
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*Lifetime subscriptions:*  
Lifetime subscriptions: £340 (UK);  
£400 (overseas); \$600 (USA).

**Back-issues**

of *Interzone* are available at  
£3.50 each in the UK (£4 each  
overseas), postage included.  
(US dollar price: \$6 Air Saver.)

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# interzone

science fiction & fantasy

SEPTEMBER 1999

Number 147

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*Cover by Dominic Harman for "Where Does the Town Go at Night?"*

Published monthly. All material is © *Interzone*, 1999, on behalf of the various contributors

**ISSN 0264-3596**

Printed by KP Litho Ltd, Brighton

**Trade distribution:** Diamond Magazine Distribution Ltd.,  
Unit 7, Rother Ironworks, Fishmarket Road, Rye,  
East Sussex TN31 7LR (tel. 01797 225229).

**Bookshop distribution:** Central Books,  
99 Wallis Rd., London E9 5LN (tel. 0181 986 4854).

## It all adds up

Dear Editors:

Some years ago, I think it was when *Interzone* reached its tenth birthday, I wrote a piece on the sf/fantasy magazines, past and present, which had published the most issues. I thought I'd just update that here:

	No of Issues
1. <i>Astounding/Analog</i>	837
– at July 1999	
2. <i>Amazing Stories</i>	597
– at Summer 1999	
3. <i>Fantasy &amp; Science Fiction</i>	575
– issues at July 1999	
4. <i>Weird Tales</i> – at Summer 1999	316
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10. <i>If/Worlds of If</i>	175

And, coming up fast at number 11 is *Interzone* with 145 [that should now read 147 – Editor]. Just another 31 issues and you'll be in the top ten, which is really quite a feat. Heck, it's already a tremendous feat for a British sf magazine. After *New Worlds*, you're the second longest-running British sf magazine. *Science Fantasy* made it to 81 issues, or 93 if you include the 12 as *Impulse* (I think of it as all the same), and *Authentic* made it to 85; so you're well past them.

(Just to be precise about figures, the *Weird Tales* total above includes the Lin Carter paperback issues and the issues published as *Worlds of Fantasy & Horror* – it's the number the current editor, Darrell Schweitzer, himself puts on the magazine. The *Wonder/Thrilling Wonder* total includes the first 12 issues as *Science Wonder*. The *New Worlds* total includes all its various incarnations.)

Keep those issues of *Interzone* coming. You'll overtake *New Worlds* in six years' time, especially as you are now the only monthly fiction magazine (the American "monthlies" having gone to 11 issues a year). If you can keep *IZ* going you'll overtake *Analog* in about 700 years!

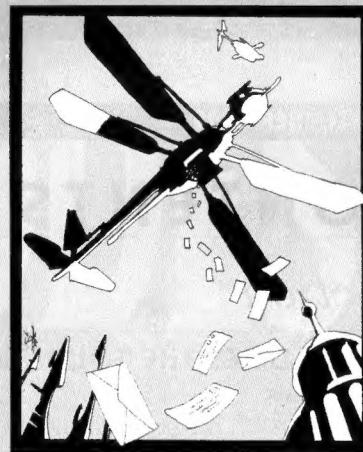
There are some special longevity celebrations coming up in the next few months. *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*'s 50th birthday is the obvious one, this October; *Analog's* 70th birthday is in December; *Amazing* hits 600 issues in the Spring (one hopes); *Interzone*'s 150th is in December...

**Mike Ashley**

*mikeashley@compuserve.com*

**Editor:** Many thanks for the plethora of statistics, Mike. You're the expert, so we bow to your knowledge. (We should explain that Mike Ashley is currently preparing a completely

## INTERACTION



revised and updated version of his 1970s book-series, *The History of the Science-Fiction Magazine*, for Liverpool University Press – a work well worth looking out for.)

### Too Much Non-Fiction?

Dear Editors:

I believe this is the first message you have got from Egypt where I think I'm the only subscriber to *Interzone*, which is a great loss to the population of Egyptian sf readers. However, despite my representing a very small minority of your readership, I believe that I have every right to express my opinions about our dear magazine.

I've been a loyal subscriber for the last four years and I confess that most of the time I enjoyed thoroughly reading my copy of *Interzone*. Many times I wanted to comment on what I read but refrained from doing so because I usually receive my copy about two months after its issue and usually it takes me another month to read it so I always thought my comments would be very old news. Another cause of not writing to you before is the fact that you managed to keep the e-mail address of *IZ* a very well-kept secret until it slipped out in the April issue in a reply to one of the letters. Of course I was very naïve to think that with the "new look" of the magazine you would put the e-mail address (which is incidentally the modern means of communication) in a prominent place, but I was astonished that it did not gain its well deserved position. Anyway I hope that you will right this wrong very soon and from the next issue we will see the e-mail address printed prominently either on the cover or next to the contents.

As I told you before I usually enjoy reading *IZ* but what I really mean is that I enjoy reading the fiction con-

tent of the magazine rather than the non-fiction content. I believe that most of your ordinary readers, not the professional sf critics or writers, would share my opinion that although having a non-fiction component is important, it should not exceed a minor part of the magazine which should be mainly devoted to the publication of science fiction and fantasy. I would like to read a short interview with one of our most eminent writers, a brief comment about sf films and TV serials and an even shorter book review about recent publications with a very apparent recommendation of books worth reading, but this should not take up about half of the magazine as it is doing now. I hope you will put my recommendations into consideration and that we will see more fiction in the coming issues.

**Dr Mostafa Kotb**

*Professor of Neurosurgery,  
Cairo University*

**Editor:** Good to hear from you. If we seem to keep the magazine's e-mail address a "secret," it's for one simple reason: we do not wish to be inundated with electronic story-submissions. We receive about 50 stories a week in hard-copy form, and that's quite enough, thank you. (Besides, neither of the assistant editors has an e-mail connection at home.) But we're happy to receive letters of comment, such as yours, by e-mail. Subscribers can also send us change-of-address notifications by this means. To remind everyone: the address is *interzone@cix.co.uk*

### Softcore?

Dear Editors:

I can only imagine that your choice of illustrations is part of a subtle joke to make *Interzone* look like a 1960s pulp mag. If this is so then I've missed the joke and am a humourless complaining git. However I'm going to complain anyway...

Specifically about the centrepiece on page 11 of *IZ* 144 (this should according to convention have been on Page Three, but no doubt you'll get this right next month). In the foreground a spread-eagled fairy kneels, arms behind her head in order to display her thrusting breasts with nipples the size of UFOs primed for lift-off. In the background another young lady sticks her bum out in an inviting manner. She is naked except for her boots, the type of boots she wears (late-80s crap heavy-metal band promo-video fantasy heavee-laydee high heels) add to the softcore iconography. Both women are posed in stereotypical porno positions.

I won't even mention the flying fairy with enormously unaerodynamic breasts a few pages on. Getting a pair of tits that size off the ground

is truly magical.

As well as being badly-executed soft-core porn, this is sexist badly-executed soft-core porn (if you need to ask "why is it sexist?" I suggest you turn to the section on visual imagery in your copy of "Feminism Explained in Very Short Words" – if you don't own one you certainly need it).

I take copies of *Interzone* to work, stuff like this is really going to help me convince sceptical colleagues that reading sci-fi isn't a mindless activity for adolescent boys. I read it on the tube, I'd rather not be mistaken for a *Sun* reader. *IZ* is a great magazine, I'd really rather not have to hide it behind a copy of *Loaded* or cringe when friends flick through it.

**Simon Robert**

*simon.robert@virgin.net*

## Part of the program

Dear Editors:

Fine stories from Zoran Zivkovic, Mary Soon Lee and Alexander Glass in *IZ* 144.

My enjoyment of Tony Ballantyne's "Soldier.exe" was slightly marred by some basic coding errors. Even allowing for the fact that the story is written in a hypothetical language of the future, there is no excuse for the inconsistent use of = and ==. Given that a mixture of the two is used, one would expect = to be used in assignments (e.g. PointsScore = 20) while == would be used in expressions (e.g. if PointsScore == 20 then). Ballantyne appears to follow this convention in the main but gets it wrong in three places. The code needs two bug fixes to make it run at all (the filename extension .exe suggests the language is interpreted rather than compiled) and a third fix to make it run correctly. Without the third fix, in the SituationCompanyKill case, all personnel in the non-aligned company would be sent into hibernation, whether or not they were above the level of assistant manager.

I can only assume that the BAR-BARA-class Artificial Intelligence which allegedly checked the code (according to the version history data at the top of the file) was malfunctioning. You just can't get the staff these days. On the plus side, "Soldier.exe" at least has a page count appropriate to the idea it presents. The same cannot be said of Richard Calder's overlong "Malignos" – a boring protagonist, overblown prose, a hideous cliff-hanger ending. With the only interesting character (Gala) unlikely to play a major part in a sequel, I fear that any further instalments would provide no antidote, but only dull my senses further.

So as not to end on a downer, here's some belated praise for "Go With the Flow" by Ben Jeapes from *IZ* 142. It's

the work of a mind inspired, and it makes me smile whenever I think of it.

**Chris Butler**

*Brighton, East Sussex*

**Editor:** *We, as editors and typesetters, are probably responsible for any "coding errors" in Tony Ballantyne's short story. Our apologies. Tony is, of course, an expert programmer.*

## The Facts About Verne

Dear Editors:

Not having had sight of the Pulp Fictions republication of Jules Verne's *Dropped from the Clouds*, I've not had sight of David Pringle's almost certainly comprehensive introduction to that reissue, which as he makes clear in his informative note in the "Books Received" pages of *Interzone* 144 is a reprint of Part One of *The Mysterious Island*.

But whatever Pringle does or does not reveal in that introduction, which I will not be alone in not having seen, it does seem that David Mathew's review of *Dropped from the Clouds*, also in *Interzone* 144, could have been somewhat more rigorous in its presentation of the text, and have explained more. There are a couple of issues.

1) Mathew does not question Pulp Fictions' odd presumption that Verne was a pulp writer, and that *The Mysterious Island* as a whole – it is always now read as one single story – is pulp fiction. An exclamatory prelude about the lurid joys of pulp does not adequately substitute for some inquiry into the appropriateness of Pulp Fiction's odd take on Verne's career.

2) Mathew seems to assume that Pulp Fictions has rescued a forgotten title from the mists of time and the rot of pulp. *Interzone* readers may have indeed forgotten or never known *The Mysterious Island*; which leads one to feel that it might have been better had they been offered some useful information, even if it contradicted the rescue archaeology implied in Pulp Fictions' presentation.

Mathew might have told us, for instance, that – far from languishing in obscurity – *The Mysterious Island* seems to have been almost constantly in print for the last century or so. My own version (the Scribners edition of 1918, illustrated with almost excessive dignity by the famous N. C. Wyeth) has been reprinted very frequently ever since. There are also limited editions around (one from the Heritage Club, 40 years ago, introduced by Ray Bradbury); and at least half a dozen other firms have issued the title. No pulp in sight.

It might also have been made clear that the three volumes Pulp Fictions is reprinting represent a 19th-century publishing tactic rather than a

straightforward issuing of what we now think of as a trilogy: *The Mysterious Island* is one story in three parts, and is now almost always published as one volume, as Verne conceived it. The three-volume format was a response to the size of the whole (my edition is almost 500 big pages), and probably a way of extending sales.

3) I think there might have been space in the review as well to mention Captain Nemo. *The Mysterious Island* is of course a sequel to *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, and the robinsonade heroics of the castaways in the first part of the story – the part here published as *Dropped from the Clouds* – are significantly undercut and ironized by the fact that Nemo, who runs the island from the control centre of the *Nautilus*, has been secretly saving their lives when necessary, and guiding their course in general. Verne was never much interested in "pulp" heroics, and *The Mysterious Island*, properly understood, could never be misconstrued as uncritically valorizing the kind of heroes typical of pulp fiction.

4) There is a translation issue. I think it's clearly appropriate for a firm like Pulp Fictions to reprint, as closely as possible, original versions of stories originally published in English. It is much less certain that they do us much of a favour by publishing 19th-century translations of work by writers like Jules Verne. As Pringle mentions in his "Books Received" note, the W. H. G. Kingston translation here reissued is bowdlerized; in general, Verne was served astonishingly badly by his contemporary translators; and in any case there is a great gap between the practice of 19th-century translators in general and what is nowadays deemed acceptable: for one thing, modern translators into English no longer tend to act as watchdogs, guarding our higher sensibilities from the crudities and unbridled candour of the Continent.

**John Clute**

*London*

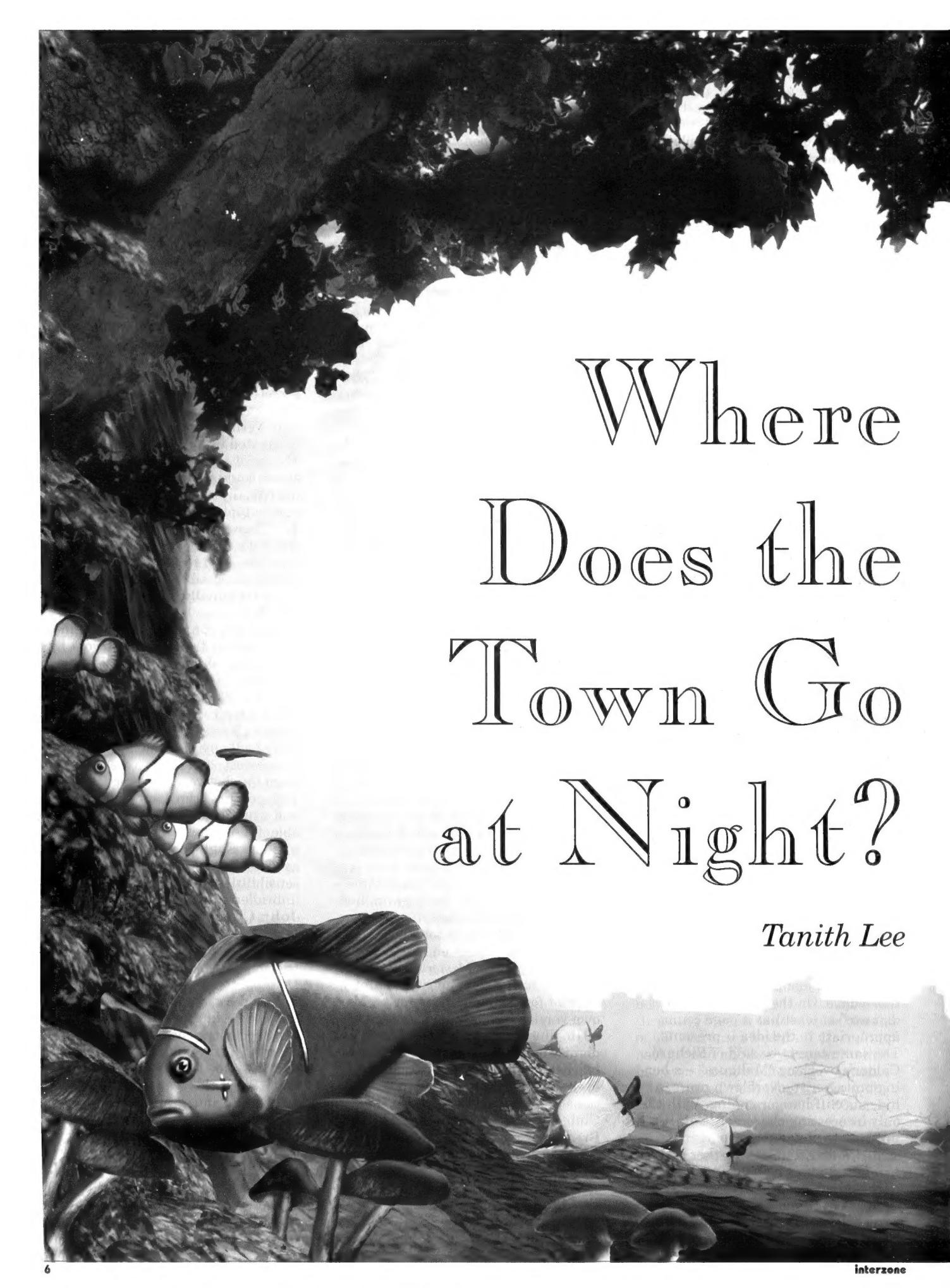
## Is he or isn't she?

Dear Editors:

In David Lee Stone's *IZ* 144 "Magazine Reviews" column, Dutch author Tais Teng was mentioned in the section on *Albedo One*. I would like to remark that last time I spoke to Tais, he was male. While this was more than two years ago – and, granted, a lot can happen in two years – I have not heard of anything so drastic that would justify use of the female pronoun now. Despite everything people are led to believe about Dutch society, gender is not (yet) a passing phase here...

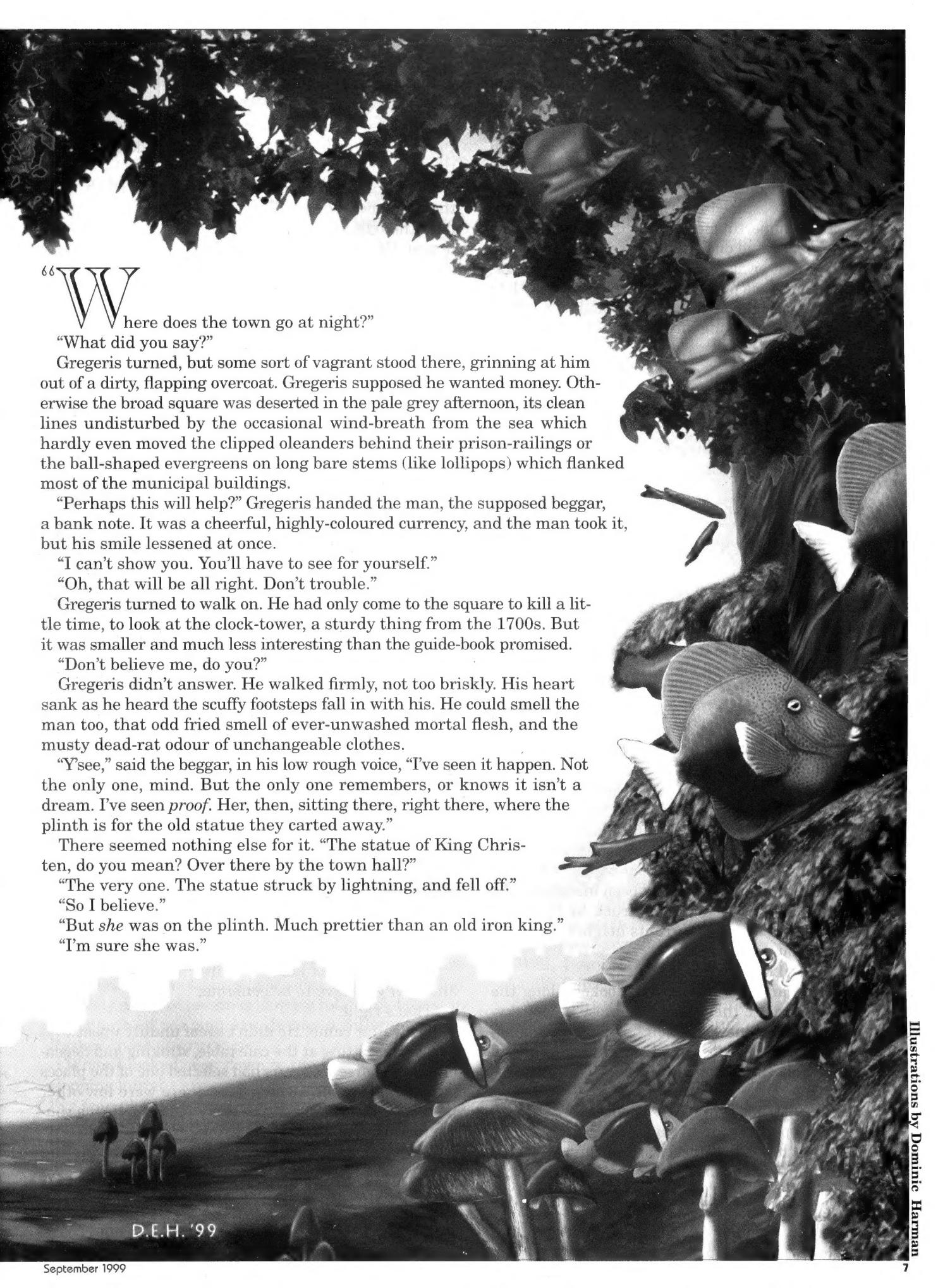
**Paul Evenblij**

*Utrecht, Netherlands*



# Where Does the Town Go at Night?

*Tanith Lee*



"Where does the town go at night?"

"What did you say?"

Gregeris turned, but some sort of vagrant stood there, grinning at him out of a dirty, flapping overcoat. Gregeris supposed he wanted money. Otherwise the broad square was deserted in the pale grey afternoon, its clean lines undisturbed by the occasional wind-breath from the sea which hardly even moved the clipped oleanders behind their prison-railings or the ball-shaped evergreens on long bare stems (like lollipops) which flanked most of the municipal buildings.

"Perhaps this will help?" Gregeris handed the man, the supposed beggar, a bank note. It was a cheerful, highly-coloured currency, and the man took it, but his smile lessened at once.

"I can't show you. You'll have to see for yourself."

"Oh, that will be all right. Don't trouble."

Gregeris turned to walk on. He had only come to the square to kill a little time, to look at the clock-tower, a sturdy thing from the 1700s. But it was smaller and much less interesting than the guide-book promised.

"Don't believe me, do you?"

Gregeris didn't answer. He walked firmly, not too briskly. His heart sank as he heard the scuffy footsteps fall in with his. He could smell the man too, that odd fried smell of ever-unwashed mortal flesh, and the musty dead-rat odour of unchangeable clothes.

"Y'see," said the beggar, in his low rough voice, "I've seen it happen. Not the only one, mind. But the only one remembers, or knows it isn't a dream. I've seen *proof*. Her, then, sitting there, right there, where the plinth is for the old statue they carted away."

There seemed nothing else for it. "The statue of King Christen, do you mean? Over there by the town hall?"

"The very one. The statue struck by lightning, and fell off."

"So I believe."

"But *she* was on the plinth. Much prettier than an old iron king."

"I'm sure she was."

D.E.H. '99

The beggar laughed throatily. "Still don't believe what I'm saying, do you? Think I'm daft."

A flash of irritation, quite out of place, went through Gregeris. It was for him an irritating time, this, all of it, and being here in this provincial nowhere. "I don't know what you *are* saying, since you haven't said." And he turned to face the beggar with what Gregeris would himself only have described as *insolence*. Because facing up to one's presumed inferiors was the most dangerous of all impertinences. Who knew what this bone-and-rag bag had once been? He might have been some great artist or actor, some aristocrat of the Creative Classes, or some purely good man, tumbled by fate to the gutter, someone worthy of respect and help, which Gregeris, his own annoying life to live, had no intention of offering.

And, "Ah," said the beggar, squaring up to him.

Gregeris saw, he thought, nothing fine or stricken in the beggar. It was a greedy, cunning face, without an actor's facial muscles. The eyes were small and sharp, the hands spatulate, lacking the noble scars of any trade, shipbuilding, writing, work of any sort.

"Well," said Gregeris.

"Yes," said the beggar. "But if you buy me a drink I'll tell you."

"You can buy yourself a drink and a meal with the money I just gave you."

"So I can. But I'll eat and drink alone. Your loss."

"Why do you want my company?" demanded Gregeris, half angrily.

"Don't want it. Want to tell someone. You'll do. Bit of a look about you. Educated man. You'll be more flexible to it, I expect."

"Gullible, do you mean?" Gregeris saw the man had also been assessing him, and finding not much, apparently. Less than flattery, education, he sensed, in this case represented a silly adherence to books – clerkishness. Well, Gregeris had been a clerk, once. He had been many things. He felt himself glaring, but the beggar only grinned again. How to be rid of him?

Up in the sky, the fussy clock-tower sounded its clock. It was five, time to take an absinthe or cognac, or a cocktail even, if the town knew they had been invented. Why hadn't the ridiculous tower been struck by lightning instead of a statue under a third its height?

"Where do you go to drink?"

Some abysmal lair, no doubt.

But the beggar straightened and looked along the square, out to where there was a glimpse of the sky-grey-rimmed, sulk-blue sea. Then he pivoted and nodded at a side street of shops, where an awning protected a little café from the hiding sun.

"*Cocco's*."

"Then take a drink with me at *Cocco's*."

"That's very sportive of you," said the beggar. Abruptly he thrust out his filthy, scarless and ignoble hand. Gregeris would have to shake it, or there would, probably, be no further doings. Ignore the ignoble hand then, and escape.

Compelled by common politeness, the curse of the bourgeoisie, Gregeris gripped the hand. And when he

did so, he changed his mind. The hand felt fat and strong and it was electric. Gregeris let go suddenly. His fingers tingled.

"Feel it, do you?"

"Static," said Gregeris calmly. "It's a stormy afternoon. I may have given you a bit of a shock. I do that sometimes, in this sort of weather."

The beggar cackled, wide-mouthed. His teeth, even the back ones, were still good. *Better*, Gregeris resentfully thought, *than my own*. "Name's Ercole," said the beggar. (*Hercules*, wouldn't you know it.) And then, surprisingly, or challengingly, "You don't have to give me yours."

"You can have my name. Anton Gregeris."

"Well, Anton" (of course, the bloody man would use the Christian name at once), "we'll go along to *Cocco's*. We'll drink, and I'll tell you. Then I've done my part. Everything it can expect of me."



This was all Marthe's fault, Gregeris reflected, as he sipped the spiced brandy. Ercole had ordered a beer, which could be made to last, Gregeris ominously thought, until – more ominous still – he watched Ercole gulp half the contents of the glass at once.

It was because of Marthe that Gregeris had been obliged to come here, to the dull little town by the sea. His first impression, other than the dullness, had been how clean and tidy the town was. The streets swept, the buildings so bleached and scrubbed, all the brass-plates polished. Just what Marthe would like, she admired order and cleanliness so much, although she had never been much good at maintaining them herself. Her poky flat in the city, crammed with useless and ugly "objets d'art," had stayed always undusted. Balls of fluff patrolled the carpets, the ashtrays spilled and the fireplace was normally full of the cold debris of some previous fire. He suspected she washed infrequently, too, when not expecting a visitor. The bathroom had that desolate air, the lavatory unwholesome, the bath green from the dripping tap. And the boy – the boy was the same, not like Marthe, but like the flat Marthe neglected.

"Thirsty," mumbled Ercole, presumably to explain his empty glass.

"Let me buy you another."

"That's nice. Not kind, of course. Not kind, are you? Just feel you have to be generous."

"That's right."

The waiter came. He didn't seem unduly upset that Ercole was sitting at the café table, stinking and degenerate. Of course, Gregeris had selected one of the places outside, under the awning. And there were few other patrons, two fat men eating early plates of fish, a couple flirting over their white drinks.

When the second beer arrived, Ercole sipped it and put it down. "Now I'll tell you."

"Yes, all right. I shall have to leave at six. I have an appointment."

So after all Marthe (the "appointment") would be his rescue. How very odd.

"You'll realize, I expect," said Ercole, "I don't have lodgings. I had a room, but then I didn't any more. Sometimes I sleep in the old stables up the hill. But there's a couple of horses there now, and they don't like me about. So I find a corner, here or there. That's how I saw it. Then again, y'see, I might have been the type to just sleep right through it, like most of them. It's what's in you, if you ask me, in yourself, that makes you wake in the night, about a quarter past midnight."

"And what have you seen?" Gregeris heard himself prompt, dutifully.

Ercole smiled. He put his hands on the table, as if he wanted to keep them in sight, keep an eye on them, as if they might get up to something otherwise, while he revealed his secret.

"The town goes away."

"You mean it disappears?"

"Nothing so simple, Anton. No, it goes off. I mean, it *travels*."



Generally, I wake at dawn, first light, *said Ercole*. Like a damned squirrel, or a bird. Been like that for years. Sleeping rough's part of it, but I grew up on a farm. It's partly that, too. Well, when I woke the first time, which was about two months ago, I think it's dawn. But no, it's one of those glass-clear, ink-black summer nights. The moon wasn't up yet, but the stars were bright, and along the esplanade the street lamps were burning cold greeny-white from the funny electricity they get here. Nothing to wake me, either, that I can hear or see.

The moment I'm awake, I'm *wide* awake, the sort of awake when you know you won't sleep again, at least not for two or three hours, and it's better to get up and do something or you get to thinking. So presently I stand up. And then, well, I staggered. Which scared me. I hadn't had anything in the way of alcohol for about five days, so it wasn't drinking bad wine. And you can't afford to get sick, in my situation. But then my head cleared, and I just thought, maybe I got up too quick. Not so young as I was.

And then I go and take a stroll along the esplanade, like the leisured people do by day, which is when a policeman will generally come to move me elsewhere, if I try it. But no one's about now.

The sea is kicking away at the land, blue-black. It looks rough and choppy, which strikes me as strange really, because the night is dead calm, not a cloud. A sort of steady soft *thin* breeze is blowing full in my face from the mouth of sea and sky. It has a different smell, fresher, more starry *bright*.

When I looked over, down to the beach, the sea was slopping in right across it. It wasn't the tide coming in, I've seen plenty of those. No, the sea wasn't coming in, falling back but constant, gushing in up the beach, hitting the lower terrace of the esplanade, and spraying to both sides. Drops hit my face. It reminded me of something, couldn't think what. It looked peculiar, too, but I thought, after all tonight was a full moon and this moon would rise soon, maybe it was that making the sea act crazy.

Just then, the clock strikes on the tower in the square. It's one in the morning, and I can tell I've been up and about for around three quarters of an hour. That means I woke at a quarter past midnight.

I mention this, because another time I was in the square and when I woke, I noted the clock. It's always been that time, I reckon, that I wake, and the other ones who wake, they wake up then too.

That minute, the first night on the esplanade, I see one of my fellow awakers – only I didn't know it then, that we were a sort of select club. No, I thought there was going to be trouble.

It's a girl, you see, young, about 16, a slip of a thing, all flowing pale hair, and she's in her nightwear – barefoot – walking slowly along the esplanade towards me. Her eyes look like veiled mirrors, and I think she's sleep-walking or gone mad, and going to throw herself into the sea, and I'm asking myself if I should save her or let her do what she wants – have you got any more right to force someone to live that doesn't want to than to kill someone? – or if I'd better just hide, because trouble isn't what it's best for me to seek out, I'm sure you'll understand. Anyway, then she blinks, and she walks up to me and she says, "Where am I? What am I doing here?" And then I'm really scared, because she'll start screaming and God known what'll happen then. But next she says, "Oh but of course, that doesn't matter." And she leans on the railing and looks out at the sea, calm as you please.

The moon started to rise then. First a line like spilt milk on the horizon's edge. Then the sky turns light navy blue and the disc comes up so fast it almost seems to leap out of the water.

"I was in bed, wasn't I?" says the girl.

"Don't ask me. You just came along."

"They call me Jitka," she says. And then she says, "I think I looked out of the window at home. I think I remember doing that. And the hill wasn't there. You know, the hill with the old palace on it."

I know the hill, because that's where the stables are, my bedchamber of old. That big hill, about half a mile inland. Where all the historic splendour of the town is, the mansions and great houses and overgrown gardens of cobwebby, bat-hung cedars. And then the slums start all round it, either side.

*Gregeris mutters that he knows the area, he has his appointment near there.*

Well, I say to this girl called Jitka, "You've been sleepwalking, haven't you. Best get back indoors."

"No, I don't think so," says Jitka. Not haughtily as you might expect, but kind of wistful. As if she's saying, Just let me stay up half an hour longer, Dadda. But I'm not her father, so I turn away prudently, before I start trying to see through her flimsy nightie, past the ribbons to the other pretty things inside.

Perhaps not very gallant to leave her there, but I didn't go so far, only about 50 yards, before I find another one. Another Awaker. This was a gentleman sitting on a bench. He's in his nightclothes too, but with a silk dressing-gown fastened over. "Good evening," he says, and I can tell you, by day he'd have crossed the street not to see me, let alone exchange a politeness. But

I nod graciously, and when he doesn't say anything else, I walk on.

The esplanade runs for a mile, no doubt you know that from that guide-book in your pocket. I amble along it, and after another few minutes, I see these two old ducks tottering towards me, hand in hand. He's about 90 if he's a day, and she's not much less. He's got on a flannel nightshirt, the sort grandfather would've had, and she's in an ancient thing all yellow lace. And they're happy as two kids out of school. We pass within a foot of each other. and she calls out to me, "Oh isn't it a lovely fine night? What a lovely trip. Do you think we'll reach China?" So I generously say, "I should think so, lady." And they're gone, and I go on, and then I stop dead. I stare out to sea, and then down below the terrace again at the water rushing constant up the beach. What I'm thinking is this: But that's just what it's like, the way the waves are and the whole ocean parting in front of us – it's like a *bow-wave* cutting up before a ship. A moving ship, sailing quite fast. But then I think, Ercole, you've got no business thinking that. And suddenly I feel dog tired. So I turn and go back to my place under the columns of the library building, where I'd been sleeping. I lie straight down and curl up and pull my coat, over my head. At first I'm stiff as a plank. Then I fall asleep. And asleep I can feel it, what I'd felt standing up when I thought I'd gone dizzy. It's the motion of a ship, you see. Not enough to make you queasy, just enough you need to get your sea-legs. Then I'm really asleep. I didn't wake again until dawn. Nothing up then, not at all. A street-sweeper, and a pony-cart with kindling, and then a girl with milk for the houses by the park. A couple of cats coming back from their prowl. Moon down, sun up, rose-pink and blushing after its bath in the sea. That's all.

*Gregeris says, "A memorable dream."*

S'what I thought. Course I did. You don't want to go nuts in my situation, either. They cart you off to the asylum first chance they can get.

No, I went and scrounged some breakfast at a place I know, well, to be truthful, a garbage-bin I know. Then I went for my usual constitutional round the town. It was by the church I found them.

*"Found what?"*

Ah, what indeed. Sea shells. Beautiful ones, a big white whorled horn that might have come from some fabled beast, and a green one, half transparent, and all these little striped red and coral ones. They were caught in a trail of seaweed up in the ivy on this wall. People passed, and if they looked, they thought they were flowers, I suppose, or a kid's expensive toy, maybe, thrown up there and lost.

*"Perhaps they were."*

It didn't happen again for seven days. I'd forgotten, or pretended I'd forgotten. And once when I went back to that church, the shells were gone. Someone braver or cleverer or more stupid and cowardly than me had taken them down.

Anyway, this particular evening, I *knew*. Knew it was going to be another Night. Another *Awake Night*. I'll tell you how I knew. I was at the Café Isabeau, to be hon-

est round the back door, where the big woman sometimes leaves me something, only she hadn't, but I heard this conversation in the alley over the wall. There's a young man, and he's trying to get his girl to go with him into the closed public gardens, under the trees, for the usual reason, and she's saying maybe she will, maybe she won't, and then I keep thinking I know her little voice. And then he says to her, all angry, "Oh please yourself, Jitka." And then *she* says to him, "No, don't be angry. You know I would, only I think I ought to be home soon. It's going to be one of those nights when I have that peculiar dream I keep on having."

"Come and dream with me," he romantically burbles and I want to thump him on the head with one of the trash pails to shut him up, but anyway she goes on anyhow, the way a woman does, half the time – if you were to ask me, because they're so used to men not listening to them. "I keep dreaming it," she says. "Five times last month, and three the month before. I dream I'm walking in the town in my nightclothes."

"I'd like to see *that!*" exclaims big-mouth, but still she goes on, "And seven nights ago, at full moon, I dreamed it. And I knew I would, all the evening before, and I know now I will, tonight. I feel sort of excited – here, in my heart."

"I feel excited too," oozed clunk-lips, but she says, "You see, the town slips her moorings. She sails away. The town, that is, up as far as King Christen's Hill. I watched it, I think I did, drifting back, like the shore from a liner. And then we sail through the night and wonderful, wonderful things happen – but I can't remember what. Only, I have to go home now, you see. To get some sleep before I wake up. Or I'll be so tired in the morning after the dream."

After she stops, he gives her a speech, the predictable one about how there are plenty or more sophisticated girls only too glad to go in the park with him, lining up, they are. Then he walks off, and she sighs, but that's all.

By the time I got round into the alley, she was starting to walk away too, but hearing me, she glanced back. it was her all right, even in her smartish costume, with her hair all elaborate, I knew her like one of my own. But she looked startled – no recognition, mind. She didn't remember meeting *me*. Instead she speeds up and gets out of the alley quick as she can. I catch up to her on the pavement.

*"What do you want? Go away!"*

*"There, there, Jitka. No offence."*

*"How do you know my name? You were spying on me and my young man!"*

Then I realize, a bit late, what I could be letting myself in for, so I just whine has she any loose money she doesn't want – and she rummages in her purse and flings a couple of coins and gallops away.

But anyway, now I know tonight is one of those Nights.

In the end, I climbed over the municipal railings and got into the public gardens myself. There's an old shed in among the overgrown area that no one bothers with. Lovers avoid it, too; there are big spiders, and even snakes, so I'm told.

I went to sleep with no trouble. Woke and heard the clock striking in the square, and it was eleven. Then I thought I'd never get off, and if I didn't I might not wake at the *right* time – but next thing I know I *am* waking up again and now there's a *silence*. By which I mean the sort of silence that has a personality of its own.

Scrambling out of the hut, I stand at the edge of the bushes, and I look straight up. The stars flash bright as the points of gramophone needles, playing the circling record of the world. And now, now I can *feel* the world *rocking*. Or, the town, rocking as it rides forward on the swell of the sea. And then I saw this thing. I just stood there and to me, Anton, it was the most beautiful thing I ever saw till then. It was like the winter festival at the farm, when I was a child, you know, Yule, when the log is brought in, and I can recall all the candles burning and little silver bells, and a girl dancing, dressed like a fairy. That was magical to me then. But this.

"What did you see?"

Gregeris asked, tightly, almost painfully, coerced into grim fascination.

It was fish. Yes, fish. But they were in the *air*. Yes, Anton, I swear to you on my own life.

They were wonderful fish, too, painted in all these colours, gold and scarlet, and puce, mauve and ice blue, and some of them tiny, like bees, and some large as a cat. I swear, Anton. And they were swimming about, in the air, round the stems of the trees, and through the branches, and all across the open space of the park, about five feet up in the air, or a little lower or higher. And then two or three came up to me. They stared at me with their eyes like orange jewels or green peppermints. They swam round me, and one, one was interested in me, kept rubbing his tail over my cheek or shoulder as he passed, so I put up my hand and stroked him. And, Anton, he was *wet*, wet and smooth as silk in a bath of rain. So I knew that somehow, now, we weren't only on the sea, but *in* the sea, maybe *under* the sea. Even though I could breathe the air. And I thought, That's how those shells got stranded up on the church wall.

Well, I stayed sitting there in the park, watching the

swimming, stroking them, all night. And once a shark came by, black as coal. But it didn't come for me, or hurt the others. Some of them even played round it for a while. No one else came. I thought, Jitka will be sorry to have missed this, and I wondered if I ought to go and find her, I knew she wouldn't be scared of me now, and find those others I'd seen, the rich man and the two old sticks, and bring them here. But they'd probably seen it before, and anyway, there were other things going on, maybe, they were looking at.

I suppose I drifted off to sleep again, sitting on the ground. Suddenly I was blinking at a grey fish flying out of a pine tree and it was a pigeon, and the sun was up.

"What's that?" said Gregeris abruptly.

The clock in the square, striking six.

"I should leave, I have an appointment."

Gregeris didn't move, except to beckon the waiter. He ordered another brandy, another beer. "Go on."

After that Night, I've had three others. I've always known, either in the afternoon or in the evening, they were coming on. Like you know if you have an illness coming, or someone can feel a storm before it starts. Only not oppressive like that. Like what the girl said, an *excitement*.

Only it's a sort of cool green echo in your chest. In your guts. It's like a scent that you love because it reminds you of something almost unbearably happy, only you can't remember *what*. It's like a bitter-sweet nostalgia for a memory you never had.

Oh, I've seen things, these Nights. Can't recall them all, that's a fact. But I keep more than the others. They think they dream it, you see, and I know it isn't a dream. We're Awake, and God knows there are precious few of us who *do* come Awake. Most of the town sleeps on, all those houses and flats, those apartments and corners and cubby-holes, all packed and stacked with sleepers, blind and deaf to it. Those buildings become like graves. But not for us. I've only met ten others, there are a few more, I should think. A precious few, like I said.

Jitka and I danced under the full moon once. Nothing bad. She's like a daughter to me now. She even calls



me Dadda, in her dream. That was the night I saw *her*. I do remember *her*. Never forget. Even when I die, I won't forget *her*.

"The woman who was on the plinth," said Gregeris, "where the statue was taken down?"

Oh but Anton, she wasn't a woman.

"You said 'She'."

So I did. It was the last Wake Night, when I woke up in the square. Something had made me do that, like it always seems to make me choose a different place to sleep, when I sense a night is coming. Full moon, like I said, already in the sky when I bedded down, just over there, under those cut trees that look like balls on sticks.

And when I woke and stood up, I was so used to it by then, the movement of the town sailing, and the smell of the sea and the wind of our passage – but then the scent of the ocean was stronger than before, and I turned and looked, across the square, to where the plinth still in. It was draped in purple, and it was *wet* purple, it poured, and ran along the square. It ran towards the sea, but then it vanished and there was just the *idea* – only the *idea*, mind – that the pavement might be *damp*. You see, she'd swum up from the sea, like the fish, through the air which is water those Nights, and she'd had to swim. She couldn't have walked. She was a mermaid.

Gregeris considered his drink.

I won't even swear to you now, Anton. You won't believe, me. I wouldn't expect it. It doesn't matter. Y'see, Anton, truth isn't killed if you don't believe in it – that's just a popular theory put about by the non-believers.

"A mermaid, you said."

A mermaid.

She was very absolutely white, not *dead* white, but *live* white. *Moon* white. And her body had a sort of faint pale bluish freckling, like the moon does, only she wasn't harsh, like the moon, but soft and limpid. And her skin melted into the blue-silver scales of her tail. It was a strong tail, and the fork of the fins was strong. Vigorous. Her hair was strong too, it reminded me of the brush of a fox or a weasel or ermine – but it was a pale green-blonde, and it waved and coiled, and *moved* on its own, or it was stirring in the breeze-currents of the water-air. And it was like currents and breezes itself, a silvery bristly silky fur-wind of hair. Her face though was still, as if it was carved like a beautiful mask, and her great still eyes were night black. She had a coronet. She was naked. She had a woman's breasts, the nipples water-colour rose like her mouth. But you couldn't desire her. Well, I couldn't. She was – like an angel, Anton. You can't desire an angel. I've heard, the old church fathers said the mermaid was supposed to represent lust and fornication. But she wasn't like that. She was holy.

The funniest thing is, I looked at her a while and then, as if I'd no need to linger, as if the marvellous was commonplace and easy, I just turned and went off for a stroll. And on the esplanade I met Jitka, and I said, "Did you see the mermaid?" and Jitka said, "Oh yes, I've seen her." It was like being gone to heaven and you say, Have you seen God today, and they answer, But of course, He's everywhere, here. Then we danced. I don't know a thing about Jitka, but her father's dead, I'd take a bet on that.

The rich man was a soldier, did I say? The old couple are in the hospital. I don't know how they get out, but maybe everyone that doesn't wake up just *can't* wake up. And they get strong those Nights, they told me. It's the cruise, they said, this bracing cruise on this liner that's sailing to the East, India or China or somesuch. And there's a little boy I see now and then. And a woman and her sister –

I do think some of them are beginning to cotton on it's not a dream. But that doesn't matter. Nor who we are, we precious few, we're nothing, there and then. We're simply *The Awake*.



Ercole had ceased to speak. They must have sat speechless, unmoving, Gregeris thought with slight dismay, for ten minutes or more.

"So you see a mermaid?" Gregeris asked now, businesslike.

"No. That was the last Night. I saw her that once. I haven't Woken since. Which means there hasn't been a Night. I don't think there has. Because I think, once you start, you go on Waking."

"You didn't speak to the mermaid. *Stroke* her."

"Come on, Anton. I wouldn't have dared. Would you? It would have been a bloody cheek. I could have dropped dead even, if I touched her. Think of the shock it would be. Like sticking your hand on the sun."

"*Take off thy shoes from thy feet, this ground is holy.*"

"Yes, exactly that, Anton. You have it. By the way, you know, don't you, why God says that, in the Bible? It's to *earth* you, in the presence of galvanic might. Otherwise you'd go up in smoke."

Gregeris rose.

"I must get on. I'll be late for my appointment." He put another of the cheerful notes on the table. "It was an interesting story. You told it well."

The beggar grinned up at him. His face was fat now, bloated by beer and talk, by importance, power.

"But, where does the town go to at night?" he repeated. "More to the point, *why* does the town come back at dawn?"

"Yes, a puzzle. Perhaps enquire, the next time."

Gregeris reached the awning's edge. Instinctively, perhaps, he glanced across the square at the plinth of King Christen's fallen statue. In his mind's eye, transparent as a ghost, he visualized the mermaid, reclining in the opal moonlight, relaxed and thoughtful, her living hair and flexing tail.

It was only as he turned and began to walk quickly inland, that Ercole called after him. "Anton! It's tonight."



The flat-house had been stylish in the 1700s, he thought, about the time of the heyday of the clock. Now it was grimy, the elegant cornices chipped and cracked and thick with dirt, and a smell of stale cabbage soup on the stairs.

He rang the bell of her apartment, and Marthe came at once. She confronted him, a thin woman who had been slender and young twelve years ago, her fair hair now too blonde, and mouth dabbed with a fierce red

which had got on to her front teeth.

"You're so late. Why are you so late? Was the train delayed? I was worried. I have enough to worry about. I thought you weren't coming, thought you'd decided to abandon us completely. I suppose that would be more convenient, wouldn't it? I can't think why you said you'd come. You could just send me another money order. Or not bother. Why bother? It's only me, and him. What do we matter? I've been just pacing up and down. I kept looking out of the window. I got some ice earlier for the wine but it's melted. I smoked 20 cigarettes. I can't afford to do that. You know I can't."

"Good evening, Marthe," he said, with conscious irony.

To Gregeris it sounded heavy-handed, unnecessarily arrogant and obtuse. But she crumpled at once. Her face became anxious, pitiable and disgusting. How had it been he had ever – ? Even twelve years ago, when she was a girl and he a younger man and a fool.

"I'm sorry. Forgive me, Anton. It's my nerves. You know how I get. It was good of you to come."

"I'm sorry, too, to be so late. I met an old business acquaintance at the station, a coincidence, a nuisance, an old bore who insisted we have a drink. He kept me talking. And of course, I couldn't make too much of it, of being here, or anything about you."

"No, no, of course."

She led him in. The apartment wasn't so bad, better than her last – or could have been. Everywhere was mess and muddle. The fairground knickknacks, some clothes pushed under a sofa cushion. Stockings hung drying on a string before the open window, the ashtrays were as always. Twenty cigarettes? Surely a hundred at least. But there was the cheap white wine in its bucket of lukewarm water. And she had made her bed. She had said she gave the bedroom over to the boy.

"How is Kays?"

"Oh – you know. He's all right. I sent him for some cigarettes. Oh, he wanted to go out anyway. He'll be back in a minute. But – I know – you don't like him much."

"What nonsense, Marthe. Of course I like him. He's only a child."

Taking him by surprise, as she always did for some reason, when she flared up, she shrilled, "He's your son, Anton."

"I know it, Marthe. Why else am I here?"

And again, the shallow awful victory of her crumbling face.

Once he had sat down, on a threadbare seat, the glass of tepid vinegar in his hand, she perched on the arm of the sofa and they made small talk.

And why had he come here? The question was perfectly valid.

It would have been so much simpler to send her, as she said, a cheque. That too, of course, was draining, annoying. Keeping it quiet was sometimes quite difficult, too. He was generally amazed no one had ever found him out, or perhaps they had and didn't care. His brief liaison with this woman had lasted all of two weeks. Two months later, when she reappeared, he had known at once. It was damnable. He had taken every

precaution he could, to protect both of them from such an accident. He wondered if her pregnancy owed nothing to him at all, he was only a convenient dupe. The story-telling beggar, Ercole, had had him to rights, Gregeris thought, bourgeois politeness and the fear of a sordid little scandal. It was these which had made him set Marthe up in the first flat, made him pay her food bills and her medical expenses. And, once the child was born, had caused him to try to pay her off. But however much he awarded her, in the end, she must always come creeping back to him, pleading penury. Finally he began to pay her a monthly sum. But even that hadn't been the end of it. Every so often, she would send a frantic letter or telegram – and these, if ignored, had on two occasions persuaded Marthe to appear in person, once with the child (then a snivelling, snotty eight years old, clinging to her hand), in the doorway of Gregeris's mother's house, during her 60th birthday dinner.

That time Gregeris had considered having Marthe, and very likely the boy, murdered. Just as he had, for a split second, considered murdering her himself that day by the canal when she announced, "You've put me in the family way, Anton. Fixed me up, good and proper, and you're the only one can set me right. Oh, not an abortion. I won't have that. One of my friends died that way. No, I need you to look after me."

And probably, thought Gregeris now, sipping the dying (really unborn) wine, only bourgeois politeness and the fear of a scene, that which had passed Marthe off to his mother as an "employee," had also saved her neck.

"I'm sorry about the wine," she fawned. "Of course, I could have asked you to bring some, but I didn't like to" (now fawning slipping seamlessly to accusation), "it would have been nicer than what I can afford, though, wouldn't it? I can see you don't like this one. It was better cold. If you'd come sooner."

Poor bitch, he thought. Can't I even spare her a few hours, some decent food and drink? She's got nothing, no resources, she can barely even read. And I need only do this, what? Once or twice a year... once or twice in all those days and nights. He glanced at her. She had washed and was not too badly dressed, her bleached hair at least well brushed. Somehow she had even got rid of the lipstick on her teeth.

"When the boy comes back, why don't I take you to dinner, Marthe?"

Oh God. She flushed, like a schoolgirl. Poor bitch, poor little bitch.

"Oh yes, Anton, that would be such fun... But I can't leave Kays."

"Well, bring Kays. He can eat dinner too, I suppose?"

"Oh no, no, I don't think we should. He gets so restless. He's so – awkward. He might embarrass you." Gregeris raised his brows. Then he saw she wanted to be alone with him. Perhaps she had some dream of reunion, or even of love-making. She would be disappointed.

At this moment the door to the flat opened, and his son walked in.

*My son.* The only son, so far as he knew, that he had. Kays.

"Good evening, Kays. You seem well. How are you

going on?"

"All right."

Marthe looked uncomfortable, but she didn't reprove or encourage the monosyllabic, mannerless little oaf. Come to think of it, her own social graces weren't so marvellous.

As usual at a loss with children, "How is your school?" Gregeris asked stiffly.

"Don't go."

"Don't you? You should. Learn what you can while you have the chance—" The wry platitudes stuck in Gregeris's throat. It was futile to bother. The boy looked now less sullen than — what was it? Patient. *Bored*, by God.

What was that quaint adjective Gregeris had thought of for the sea? *Sulk-blue*, that was it. The boy's eyes were *sulk-grey*. Nearly colourless. Pale uneven skin, he would get spotty later no doubt, and perhaps never lose it, greasy tangled hair and unclean clothes that probably smelled. The child would smell, that unwashed-dog odour of unbathed children, redolent of slums everywhere. Like the beggar...

Take this child to dinner? *I don't think I will*. The mother was bad enough, but in some gloomy ill-lit café it would be tolerable. But not the weedy, pasty, morose brat.

My son. Kays. *How can he be mine?* He looks nothing like me. Not even anything like Marthe.

(For a moment, Gregeris imagined the boy's life, the woman leaning on him, making him do her errands, one minute playing with his dirty hair — as now — then pushing him off — as now. Always surprising him by her sudden over-sentimental affections and abrupt irrational attacks — perhaps not always verbal, there was a yellowish bruise on his cheek. And the school was doubtless hopeless and the teachers stupid and perhaps also sadistic.)

This was the problem with coming to see her, them. *This*, this thinking about her, and about Kays. The town by the sea should have taken them far enough away from Gregeris. It had required three hours for him to get here.

"Well, Kays." Gregeris stood over him.

The top of the child's crown reached the man's ribcage. The child's head was bowed, and raised for nothing. "Here, would you like this? Another cheerful note. Too much, far too much — someone would think the boy had stolen it. "Your mother and I are going out for some air. A glass of wine."

And she chirruped, "Yes, Kays, I'll take you over to Fat Anna's."

After all the boy's head snapped up. In his clutch the lurid money blazed, and in his eyes something else took pallid fire.

"No."

"Oh yes. You like Fat Anna's."

"Don't want to."

"Don't be a baby, Kays. Fat Anna will give you pancakes."

"No, she doesn't. No, not now."

Held aside in a globe of distaste, Gregeris watched the venomous serpent rise in Marthe and glare out from her eyes. "You'll do as I say, d'you hear?" The voice lifted, thin and piercing as the doorbell. "Do as I say, or I'll —"

Checking now, not to reveal herself as hard or spiteful, unfeminine, unpleasant, before the benefactor — "Be a good boy," tardy wheedling, and then her hand gripping on the thin arm, working in another, dark-then-fade-yellow bruise. "I don't see your Uncle Anton, except now and then. He's too busy —"

Kays was crying. Not very much, just a defeated dew of tears on the white cheeks. But he made no further protest, well lessoned in *this* school at least.

Later, in the restaurant, among the nearly clean tablecloths, the wax stains and smell of meat sauce, Marthe confessed, "Anna locks him in the small room, she has to, he runs away. But I have to have him protected, Don't I, when I'm not there — ?"

Gregeris, who had helped escort the prisoner to the woman's tenement cave (in one of the nastier streets, behind King Christen's Hill), considered that perhaps Marthe was often out, often away, at night. Or, more likely, often had company *in* at night. (The boy shoved in the bedroom and warned not to leave it.) It had been a man's shirt pushed under the sofa cushion. What a curious article to leave behind. Had Gregeris been meant to notice it?



He had intended to return that night to the city. But when he got free of Marthe it was almost ten, and Gregeris felt he was exhausted. The dinner, naturally, had been a mistake. They had parted, she with false sobs, and acrimony, Gregeris restrained, starchy, and feeling old.

What on earth had they said to each other? (Her excuse for demanding Gregeris's presence had been some conceivably-invented concern over Kays, that he slept poorly or something like that. But presently she said that he often ran away, even at night. And then again she said that she thought Kays was insane — but this was after the second bottle was opened.)

Otherwise, the conversation had been a dreary complaining recital of her burdensome life, leaving out, as he now thought, her casual encounters with other men. her possible prostitution. When at last he had been able to pay the bill and put her in a taxi-cab for the flat-house, her face was for an instant full of dangerous outrage. Yes, she had expected more. Was *used* to more.

After this, surely, he must keep away from her. During the meal, watching her scrawny throat swallowing, he had again wondered, with the fascination of the dreamer who could only ever fantasize, how much of a challenge it would be to his hands.

He found quite a good hotel, or his taxi found it for him, on the tree-massed upper slope of the hill. It nestled among the historic mansions, a mansion once itself, comfortable and accommodating for anyone who might afford it. Thank God for money and hypocrisy, and all those worthless things which provided the only safety in existence. He must never visit Marthe again. Or the awful boy, who surely could now only grow up to be a thug, or the occupant of some grave.

Gregeris took a hot bath and drank the tisane the hotel's housekeeper had personally made for him. He

climbed into the comfortable, creaking bed. Sleep came at once. Thank God too for such sleep, obedient as any servant.



Gregeris woke with a start. He heard a clock striking, a narrow wire of notes. Was it midnight? Why should that matter to him?

He sat up, wide awake, full of a sensation of anxiety, almost terror – and excitement. For a moment he couldn't bring himself to switch on the lamp. But when he did so, his watch on the bedside table showed only eleven. He had slept for less than a quarter of an hour, yet it had seemed an eternity. The confounded clock in the square had woken him. How had he heard it, so far up here, so far away – sound had risen, he supposed.

In any case, it was the beggar, that scavenger Ercole, with his tales of midnight and the town and the sea, who had caused Gregeris's frisson of nerves.

Gregeris drank some mineral water. Then he got up and walked over to the window, drawing back the curtains. The town lay below, there it was, stretching down away from the hill to the flat plain of the sea. There were fewer lights, all of them low and dim behind their blinds, only the street lamps burning white, greenish-white, as Ercole had said. The clock-tower, the square, were hidden behind other buildings.

When did the town, that part of the town beyond the hill, which went sailing, set off? Midnight, Gregeris deduced. That would be it. And so the motion would gradually wake those ones who did wake, by about a quarter past. After all, that hour, between midnight and one in the morning, was the rogue hour, the hour when time stopped and began again, namelessly, like a baby between its birth and its first birthday – not yet fully realized, or part of the concrete world.

It was quite plausible, the story. Yes, looking down from the hill at the town, you could credit this was the exact area which would gently unhook itself, like one piece of a jigsaw, from the rest, and slip quietly out on the tide.

Gregeris drank more water. He lit a cigarette, next arranged a chair by the window. Before he sat down, he put out his bedside lamp, so that he could see better

what the town got up to.

This was, of course, preposterous, and he speculated if months in the future he would have the spirit to tell anyone, some business crony, his elderly mother, jokingly of course, how he had sat up to watch, keep sentinel over the roving town which sailed away on certain nights not always of the full moon, returning like a prowling cat with the dawn.

"A beggar told me. Quite a clever chap, rough, but with a vivid, arresting use of words."

But why had Ercole told him anything? Just for money? *Then I've done my part*, he had said. *Everything it can expect of me.*

It? Who? The town? Why did the town want its secret told? To boast? Perhaps to *warn*.

Gregeris gazed down. There below, hidden by the lush curve of the many-gardened hill, the slum where she lived, Marthe. And the boy.

There they would be, sleeping in their fug. And the town, sailing out, would carry them sleeping with it.

Gregeris couldn't deny he liked the idea of it, the notion of this penance of his carried far out to sea.

Well. He could watch, see if it was. Half amused at himself, yet he was strangely tingling, as if he felt the electricity in

the air which had galvanized Ercole's filthy palm, and, come to think of it, the boy's, for when Gregeris had put the bank note into Kays's fingers, there had been a flicker of it, too, though none on Marthe.

*Certainly I never felt more wide awake.*

He would be sorry, no doubt, in the morning. Perhaps he could doze on the train, although he disliked doing that.

It was better than lying in bed, anyway, fretting at insomnia.

Avidly Gregeris leaned forward, his chin on his hand.



The sound was terrible, how terrible it was. What in God's name was it? Some memory, caught in the dream – oh, yes, he remembered now, after that train crash in the mountains, and the street below his room full of people crying and calling, and women screaming, and the rumble of the ambulances –

Horrible. He must wake up, get away.

Gregeris opened his eyes and winced at the blinding

light of early day, the sun exploding full in the window over a vast sea like smashed diamonds.

But the sound – it was still there – it was all round him. There must have been some awful calamity, some disaster – Gregeris jumped to his feet, knocking over as he did so the little table, the bottle and glass, which fell with a crash. Had a war been declared? There had been no likelihood of such a thing, surely.

Under Gregeris's window, three storeys down (as in the comfortable hotel all about), voices rose in a wash of dread, and a woman was crying hysterically, "Jacob – Jacob –"

Then, standing up, he saw. That is, he *no longer* saw. For the sight he would see had vanished, while he slept, he that had determined to watch all night, the sight which had been there below. The view of the town.

The town was gone. All that lay beyond the base of the hill was a great curving bay of glittering, prancing, sun-dazzled sea. The town had sailed away. The town had not returned.

Gregeris stood there with his hands up over his mouth, as if to keep in his own rash cry. *Marthe – Kays –* The town had sailed away and they had been taken with it, for their slum below the hill was the last section of the jigsaw-piece, and they were now far off, who knew how far, or where, that place where those asleep slept on in the tombs of their houses (would they ever *Wake*? There was a chance of it now, one might think), and the air was sea, and fish swam through the trees and the creatures of the deeps, and the mermaid floated to the plinth, blue-white, white-blue-green, contemplative and black of eye –

Someone knocked violently on the door. Then the door burst open. No less than the manager bounded into the room, incoherent and wild eyed.

"So sorry to disturb – ah, you've seen an earthquake, they say – the police insist we must evacuate – the hill's so near the edge – perhaps not safe – hurry, if you will – No! No time to throw on your coat – quickly! Oh my God, my God!"



Some big ugly building accommodated the group in which Gregeris found himself. He thought it must be a school of some sort, once a grand house. It was cluttered with hard chairs, cracked windows, and cupboards full of text books. No one was allowed yet to leave. Everyone, it seemed, must give their name and address, even visitors such as Gregeris, and then be examined by a medical practitioner. But the examination was cursory – a light shone in the eyes, the tempo of the heart checked – and although three times different persons wrote down his details, still they refused to let him go. Soon, soon, they said. You must understand, we must be sure of who has survived, and if you are all quite well.

Several were not, of course. The fusty air of the school was thick with crying. So many of the people now crowded in there had "lost" – this being the very word they used – families, friends, lovers. Some had lost property, too. "My little shop," one man kept wailing, blundering here and there. "Five years I've had it – opened

every day at eight – where is it, I ask you?"

None of them knew where any of it was. They had woken from serene sleep to find – *nothing*. An omission.

It was an earthquake. That area had fallen into the sea. An earthquake and tidal wave which had disturbed no one, not even the pigeons on the roofs.

Had any others had a "warning," as Gregeris had? He pondered. Some of them, through their confusion and grief, looked almost shifty.

But his mind kept going away from this, the aftermath, to the beggar, Ercole. What had become of him, *Awake*, and sailing on and on? And those others, the girl called Jitka, the old couple from the hospital, and the rich soldier, and the ones Ercole hadn't met or hadn't recollected?

Was the town like one of those sea sprites in legend, which seduced, giving magical favours and rides to its chosen victims, playing with them in the waves, until their trust was properly won. Then riding off deep into the sea and drowning them?

The thought came clearly. *Don't mislead yourself.* it isn't that. Nothing so mundane or simple.

God knew. Gregeris never would.

It was while he was walking about among the groups and huddles of people, trying to find an official who would finally pass him through the police in the grounds outside, that Gregeris received the worst shock of his life. Oh, decidedly the worst. Worse than that threat in his youth, or that financial fright seven years ago, worse than when Marthe had told him she was pregnant, or arrived in the birthday dinner door. Worse, much, much worse than this morning, standing up and seeing only ocean where the houses and the clock-tower and the square had been. For there, amid the clutter of mourning refugees from world's edge, stood Kays.

But was it Kays? Yes, yes. No other. A pale, fleshless, dirty little boy, his face tracked now by tears like scars, and crying on and on.

Some woman touched Gregeris's arm, making him start. "Poor mite. His mother's gone with the rest. Do you know him? Look, I think he knows *you*. Do go and speak to him. None of us can help."

And in the numbness of his shock, Gregeris found himself pushed mildly and inexorably on. A woman did, he thought, always manage to push you where she decided you must go. And now he and the boy stood face to face, looking up or down.

"How – are you here?" Gregeris heard himself blurt. And as he said it, knew. Fat Anna's street, where the boy had been penned, was the other, the wrong side, of the hill. And Marthe, damn her, drunk and selfish to the last, hadn't thought to fetch him back. Gregeris could just picture her, her self-justifying mumbles as she slithered into her sty of a bed. *He'll be all right. I'm too upset tonight. I'll go for him in the morning.*

Good God, but the boy had *known* – his panic, for panic it had been, his rage and mutiny that he was too small to perpetrate against the overbearing adults. And that fat woman locking him up so he couldn't escape, as normally he always did from Marthe... Ercole had said, "And there's a little boy I see, now and then."

"You were *Awake*," Gregeris said.

They stood alone in the midst of the grey fog, the mystery of strangers.

"I mean, you were Awake, those special Nights. Weren't you, Kays?"

Sullen for a moment, unwilling. Then, "Yes," he replied.

"And so you knew it was a Night, and you wanted to be able to go with the town, to see the fish and the mermaid – to get free."

Kays didn't say, How do you know? You, of all people, how can you know?

His face was so white it looked clean. It was clean, after all, clean of all the rubbish of life, through which somehow he had so courageously and savagely fought his way, and so reached the Wonder – only to lose it through the actions of a pair of selfish blind fools –

"Did you know – did you know this was the last chance, the last, Night?"

The boy had stopped crying for a minute. He said, "It could have been any Night. Any Night could have been the last chance."

Oh God, when we dead awaken – the last trump sounded and the gate of Paradise was flung wide – and we kept him from it. Just because we, she and I, and all the rest, have always missed our chance, or not, seen it, or turned from it, despising. She slept like a stone, but he, my son, he Woke. And I've robbed him of it for ever.

"Kays..." Gregeris faltered.

The boy began to cry again, messily, excessively, but still staring up at Gregeris, as if through heavy rain.

He wasn't crying for Marthe, how could he be? But for Paradise, lost.

"I'm so sorry," said Gregeris. Such stupid words.

But the child, who saw Truth, his child, who was Awake, knew what Gregeris had actually said. He came to Gregeris and clung to him, ruining his coat, weeping, as if weeping for all the sleeping world, and Gregeris held him tight.



**Tanith Lee's** previous stories for this magazine were "The Girl Who Lost Her Looks" (#128), "Yellow and Red" (#132), "Jedella Ghost" (#135) and "The Sky-Green Blues" (#142). Her stories also appear regularly in the revived American pulp *Weird Tales*, edited by Darrell Schweitzer and George Scithers: a recent run of that magazine which Darrell has kindly sent us includes Tanith's "Flower Water" (Summer 1998), "Stars Above, Stars Below" (Fall 1998), "Unlocking the Golden Cage" (Spring 1999) and "Scarlet and Gold" (Summer 1999). She lives in the East Sussex, by the sea.

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## *Richard A. Lupoff*

Walter pushed himself upright and walked slowly to the window, drawn by the sound of shots and sirens. He wasn't really old, it was just that everything seemed an effort since Meg's death. It was as if he had to debate with himself before he took the smallest action.

Should I take a drink of water?

Well, I think I will.

Why should I?

I'm thirsty.

Oh, all right, then I'll take a drink of water.

Should I scratch my nose?

Why should I scratch my nose?

It itches.

Oh. But maybe it will stop by itself.

No, I think I'll scratch. It will stop itching sooner that way. Besides, I don't see why I shouldn't scratch it.

All right then, scratch.

It went like that. Every action, every decision. It was as if he'd lost the driver inside that had propelled him through his life.

"Darling, don't."

He paused and looked down. His sister was seated on the sofa beside her husband. She reached toward Walter.

"Stay away from the window, darling. It could be dangerous. You could be—" She stopped, realizing that she was stirring up painful recollections. Recollections that were all too fresh to start with, images that she knew tormented her brother.

"It's all right, sister. It's all right, Allie. What if I get shot, eh? Do I care?"

The night outside was clear and a bright moon hung over the Mississippi. A freak cold spell had brought a rare sprinkling of snow to New Orleans, and revellers in the French Quarter regarded it as an omen. Something special for this very special night.

"Look at that." Walter smiled wanly, his hand pressed against the window-sash.

Allie and her husband, James, remained seated.

Walter turned back toward them. He shook his head slowly. "There's nothing to be afraid of. No more than

there is any time, anywhere, any more." He gestured. "Come and take a look."

A group of revellers had decided to get themselves up as cartoon characters, and were parading through the streets in outlandish costumes, drinks in hand. They were led by Wonder Woman in full regalia, in her abbreviated costume of patriotic colours, her boots, her long blue-black hair surmounted by her golden tiara.

She had her magic lasso in her hand. She was leading a muscular young man wearing black tights with white skull and crossbones on his chest.

Walter sensed Allie and James behind him, one just to his left, the other just to his right. He felt Allie take his free hand. James put his own hand on Walter's shoulder.

"You see that fellow?" Walter asked. "He's dressed as the Black Terror. Pretty obscure reference. They must be pretty serious collectors to have a Black Terror in their gang."

The moonlight might have glinted off the window of Walter's apartment, here on the second story above the book shop that he would have to operate alone now, now that Meg was dead. The killer had fled and Walter had called 9-1-1 and the police had got there fast.

There was nothing they could do for Meg, for all that they'd gone through the motions of applying pressure to her wound and attempting resuscitation. Walter knew she was dead and the paramedics confirmed it when they arrived. Still, they'd taken her to the hospital and an MD on duty in the ER had made it official.

It could have happened to anybody.

James was talking about the university, his classes and faculty manoeuvrings and campus politics back in Chicago. It was his way of trying to give comfort, Walter knew. He let them lead him back to his easy chair and guide him into it, and James was telling some dull story about the history department and Walter nodded from time to time as if he actually cared about what his brother-in-law was saying, even though he didn't.

Allie said, "What about something to eat? Or drink? It's chilly in here, you don't have any heat, Walter. I always told Meg, you should have heat in this place. What if I make a pot of tea, would you like some tea?"

Walter waved his hand. "If you'd like some. Not for me. Or have some brandy. You want some brandy? Allie, James?" Walter's sister Alicia was Allie but his brother-in-law James was only James not Jimmy or Jim or Jay. "Maybe a glass of scotch. We should have champagne to welcome the new millennium but I don't have any, I didn't get to the store."

He meant Jenkins' grocery across the street. He'd got to his own store, the bookstore. Meg had died there. Meg's full name was Margaret. Meg had died in the store and the killer had panicked and fled with nothing to show for his efforts except a murder on his conscience.

And of course the police were looking for him, but Walter couldn't give much of a description and there were no other witnesses. The book shop hadn't been busy on December 30. People don't come to New Orleans to scout used books anyway. Walter and Allie had operated the shop for years, barely earning back their expenses. They

both drew pensions and the store didn't have to do much more each month than earn its own modest rent. It gave them something to do, brought a small trickle of interesting people to their door, kept them alive in a way.

Until it brought Meg her death.

James said, "I will have a glass of brandy, if you don't mind."

Walter went into the kitchen and re-emerged bearing a small tray. Three glasses and a bottle of brandy stood on it. He set it on a low table and went to the wall and turned on some music. "Mozart," he said. "Meg's favourite." He tilted his head, then nodded when he'd identified the piece. "The Jupiter. It's a real war-horse, isn't it, but there's no finer music in the world."

He poured a small glass of liquor for each of them. Allie and James lifted theirs and looked expectantly at Walter.

Raising his own glass he said, "It was very good of you to fly down here on such short notice."

They answered simultaneously but he was able to sort their words from the jumble.

"Darling, poor, poor Meg. Such a terrible thing to happen. Such a terrible thing."

"Of course we came, there was never any question. The airline was very helpful. They said they understood."

"I told her time and again, if they want money let them have it. We were held up once before, did you know that? Almost. Some thugs came in, a couple of children really. Meg was in the back and I was behind the counter and two thugs came in, they looked like skinny children, they couldn't have been more than eleven, twelve. They said, 'Give it over, give it over all your money.'

"I thought they were playing a joke. I started to laugh, then the bigger one pulled a gun out of his pants and pointed it at me. Just then a cop walked in. He must have been driving past and saw them through the window and he came in with his own gun and took them away. The kid had a toy gun. I had to testify at their trial. Not a trial, a hearing. They were children. They were released to their parents. They said they were going to come back and kill us but I never saw them again."

James asked, "Could they be – could one of them be the one who – who killed Meg?"

Walter shook his head. "They were black. This one was white. I could tell that much. He wore a ski mask but I could see around his eyes and mouth and his hands. He was white."

He turned away from Allie and James and went back to the window. He could see the clock in Jenkins' window, a neon advertising clock. It was a quarter to midnight. The revelry in the streets was growing wilder. He saw more costumes. A woman in an abbreviated outfit of shimmering black satin complete with gloves and boots and mask was trolling slowly up the street on a huge motorcycle. Her skin looked as white as death.

Walter murmured, "The Black Cat."

"Eh?" Walter turned and saw James's questioning expression.

"Just another old character. I loved the adventure characters when I was a boy. It's nice to see them now. Meg always thought I was childish. She preferred real literature. What she called real literature. You know the

last sale we made? The last sale we made before the killer came into the store?"

Allie and James sat holding their glasses before them. The Mozart played on. Across the street, the neon advertising clock in Jenkins' window edged closer to midnight.

"A set of cheap paperback novels. Someone collected them. Nine little books from a company in Chicago, not one book you ever heard of, not one author. There's no book in the world but somebody loves it."

Suddenly he was overwhelmed by his rage and his outrage at what had happened. "There are monsters all around us," he shouted.

His sister looked alarmed. His brother-in-law started to rise. Walter inhaled sharply, searching for control of himself. "When the children were here and the police came they told us to give any gangster anything he wanted, it was better than getting killed. Meg knew that. She wasn't trying to defy him. She was reaching for the money box. We don't even have a cash register. The business we do, who needs it? We keep the receipts in a box. She reached for the box and he yelled at her. He called her something terrible. He must have thought she was reaching for a gun and he panicked and killed her and then he ran away."

Allie was holding him and he was shaking. He didn't know what to do with his brandy glass so he just dropped it. Maybe it would stain the rug. It didn't really matter.

"You know, such a little thing. She could have said... She could have said..." He stopped, gasping. He freed himself from Allie's embrace. "She could have said, 'Look, mister, the cash is right here, right here in a box under the counter. You can come around and get it yourself, you don't trust me.' And he could come around the counter and take the cash, what did we have, thirty, forty dollars? What does it matter? But she went to hand it to him. Maybe we could change it. I could go back somehow, it was only yesterday. Meg."

He fell to his knees, weeping.

"My Meg."

His sister knelt and held him.

He said his wife's name and cried.

His brother-in-law put strong hands on his shoulders and helped him back to his chair.

"Every hundred years," James said. "The end of every century, crime rises, religious madness, anarchy, violence. And the end of the millennium. The year 1000, you know, people thought it was the end of the world, the second coming, there were mass suicides, madness. Now it's happening again."

The historian, doing his best, trying to give comfort he didn't know how to give.

Walter said, "Allie, Allie the physicist."

She smiled and held both his hands in one of hers, pressed the other to his cheek.

"Help me go back and fix it."

She shook her head sadly.

After a while he said, "You can't."

"No."

"There's no way."

She said, "There might be other universes, other realities. Quantum theory is so strange. Nothing is true or

false, Walter, everything is either probably true or probably false. Or probably probably true or not so probably true or not so probably false. Every particle in the universe, every time it wiggles, it creates another whole universe. There are an infinity of infinities of universes. Maybe there's one where she said that. Where she lived."

He sighed. "I would give my life. I would have died for her. If I could just stand up and walk in the next room and there would be a golden shimmering, a shimmering or glimmering, and I could step into it and she was there, she was alive."

Margaret stood looking out the frost-rimmed window, watching a few white flakes drift from the sky. They settled onto the lawn and yesterday's still unshovelled snow, onto the tree still decorated with its colourful lights, onto the Santa with his sleigh and reindeer. If only Walter were here to watch. If only he were here at her side.

She turned and nodded to her sister-in-law and brother-in-law seated side by side on the expensive yet comfortable sofa. Behind them a fire crackled on the flagstone-flanked hearth. She brushed something or nothing from the front of her black dress.

Her sister-in-law, Allie, said, "Meg, come and sit with us. Come, darling, sit with us."

Robotlike she obeyed. What did it matter? Sit or stand, walk or lie down, live or die.

Actually it did matter. It would be much better to die than to live. She had only to find the strength to die.

She stared into the fire. After a little while she became vaguely aware of music and voices. She knew it was James's choice of music. He was the historian and he liked everything that was not of the present. He had what he called his creeping deadline. Anything that was 50 years old was worthy of consideration, and as he got older himself, the 50-year line crept along behind him. Nineteen forty-seven. Nineteen forty-eight. Nineteen forty-nine.

Now it was just minutes before the clocks struck midnight and it would be the new year, the new century, the new millennium. The millennium was making its way around the world, time zone by time zone. In a little while it would reach Chicago and we would be living in the year 2000.

But Meg would be living in the year 2000 without her husband.

"Meg, dear?"

It was her sister-in-law, Allie. Alicia.

"Are you all right, Meg?"

"Of course not," she ground bitterly.

"I know. I'm sorry. I was just —"

"No." Meg shook her head. "I'm the one who should — I mean, you and Walter — you took me in. I'm nothing to you. I —"

"You're our family."

"I should have done what he wanted."

Allie and James were silent. The fire hissed and popped. Softly, a woman's voice came from concealed speakers. In a moment of peculiar clarity Meg identified the woman as Jo Stafford, the song as "I'll Be With You in Apple Blossom Time." The recording was old enough to meet James's 50-year rule. Old enough and then some.

She would not be with her husband again, not in apple blossom time or any other time.

"I should have done what he wanted," she repeated. "He wanted to move, did you know that? We used to take vacations. New York, Los Angeles, Montreal. New Orleans was his favourite city. Funny, the first time we went there he didn't want to go. It was my idea. I talked him into it and he fell in love with the city. When we both retired and got our pensions he wanted to go there and open a little book shop, but I wouldn't do it so we stayed in Chicago and now he's dead."

"It wasn't your fault, Margaret." Walter had called her Meg, Allie called her Meg, James always called her Margaret.

She looked into his face, challenging him to say more.

"It was a heart attack, Margaret. He was a heavy man, he went outside in below-zero weather and shovelled snow. It happens every winter, you hear it on the news all the time. It was nobody's fault. Certainly not yours."

James stood up and walked to the sideboard. An engraved platter stood there, with good wine and crystal glasses and cheese and three small limoges dishes and three tiny silver forks. Three of each, not four. "You should take a glass of wine, Margaret."

She shook her head.

"Alicia?" He tried his wife.

"You go ahead, James."

The wine had been breathing since afternoon. He poured himself a glass and raised it. "Better days," he said.

The women stood watching as he downed half the wine, studied the glass, then lowered it to a monogrammed coaster. If he had sought something in the glass he gave no indication of finding it, or of failing to find it.

With a muffled boom, fireworks exploded over Lake Michigan. You couldn't see the lake itself from James and Alicia's large Tudor-revival house, but from the front windows the fireworks were visible, rising like backwards meteors into the black sky and then exploding into multiple ribbons of colour.

"Is it midnight already?" James asked. Then, after studying his pocket watch — he must be the last man in Chicago to wear a vest and keep a pocket watch in its pocket — he answered his own question. "No. Some eager beaver must have jumped the gun. Well, it will be 2000 soon enough."

He stood up and assumed the voice that he used when he lectured a class at the university. "Of course, the millennium won't really start for another year. There was no year zero, the first millennium started with the year one and the second millennium started with the year one thousand and one and the third millennium will start in two thousand and one, but they want to celebrate now."

The two women ignored him.

Allie saw the movement of Meg's shoulders and hurried to her, put her arm around her. She said, "Meg, Meg."

The widow raised her eyes to meet Allie's. "I can see him there." She pointed at the window, at the snowy scene outside. Lights twinkled up and down the street. Beyond her fingertip a line would have reached her own house, the only darkened house now on the street. She had lived with her husband less than 50 yards from Walter's sister

and her husband. They had been best friends since they were in their 20s. James and Allie's children had played at their house. Childless, they had revelled in the role of aunt and uncle to the other couple's children.

Those children were grown now, grown up and independent and gone away. In recent years the two elder couples had passed from maturity to middle age, to the early slope of old age, four friends, four of them living in proximity and contentment, and now there were three.

"I can still see the place in the snow," Meg said to Allie. "See there, beside the little lamp near the curb. See, Allie? He pulled on his boots and his mackinaw and he tramped down the path to the sidewalk. He always did that. Every winter. He always liked to start at the sidewalk and shovel back toward the house. He always said it was just coming home, he never minded."

"Come away, dear." Allie tugged at Meg's hand, trying to draw her away from the window. "Come and sit by the fire, it's too chilly here."

Instead, Meg took another step toward the window. "If I squeeze my eyes closed and then open them just a slit, I can see him through the tears. I can see him fall down just like he did. He didn't move. Not a muscle. He just fell down dead. But if I try hard enough I can see him, I can make him get up again. It wasn't a heart attack. It was an icy spot and he slipped. He twisted his ankle. He stepped on a rock. Some child left a toy there and the snow covered it up. I can make him do it. I know him so well, his glasses fall halfway off and he uses the snow shovel to brace himself and he gets up and fixes his glasses. He brushes himself off, the snow off his mackinaw, and he waves to me, I'm standing in the window and he waves to me so I'll know he's all right. He looks embarrassed. He thinks he looked foolish falling down and he's embarrassed."

She turned away from the window and took Allie's upper arms in her hands. Allie could feel Meg's fingers, as hard and as cold and as sharply pointed as icicles, digging into her arms. This time Meg let Allie lead her back to the sofa. She let Allie seat her beside James, then Allie sat sideways beside Meg so she could hold her hands and speak with her.

"Do you think," Meg asked in a peculiar voice, "if everyone in the city of Chicago concentrated at the same time, they could generate enough mental energy to make Lake Michigan boil?"

Allie smiled, bemused.

James looked baffled.

"Maybe." Allie touched Meg gently on one cheek.

"Do you think if everyone in Chicago believed strongly enough that Walter was alive, he would be alive?"

James frowned.

Allie said, "I don't think so, Meg. Not really."

There was a silence among the three of them. Through it, the voice of Jo Stafford sang, "Autumn Leaves." But autumn was over and winter was here.

The log crackled and a bright ember fell through the andirons and landed on the flagstones and exploded with a hollow pop and a small shower of sparks.

"But I read a piece about something called *consensus reality*." Meg nodded for emphasis. "Didn't I read that

piece? The authors said that the universe only exists as percept. It's just the way it is because we all agree that's the way it is. If everybody believed that the sky was green, then the sky would be green. That's what the authors said. Don't you agree with them, Allie? Did you see the article, James?"

James pulled his pocket watch from his vest pocket and studied it for a long time. Meg could never understand why it took James so long to read the time from his watch, but finally he slipped it back into his pocket and said, "Nearly midnight. *Consensus reality* isn't my field." He could change topics like that without missing a beat. Sometimes Meg found it amusing; other times, annoying.

"But I agree with Bishop Berkeley," he continued. "If you don't think the physical world is real, just kick a rock. The harder the better."

He was able to chuckle at his own wit.

"You don't think that we can change reality?"

James rose and walked to the fireplace. He kicked the gray stone framing it. Grinning, he said, "Ouch." Then, more seriously, "I'm sorry, Margaret. Truly I'm sorry. But I just can't buy it. If this *consensus reality* idea were true, then where did the world come from? Did Adam and Eve dream it up out of their own minds? Or did God dream it up out of his? Does Counter-Earth exist? Does Vulcan? Are there worlds circling distant stars? Are there people in Antares and Orion? Are they there only because we believe in them, and if we didn't believe in them they would just disappear – *poof*?"

He paced back and forth, lecturing again.

"And if half of us believe in Counter-Earth and the people who live there, and the other half don't believe in Counter-Earth, does it half-exist and half-not-exist? No." He shook his head and made a sound, something like *Pah!* "And if they half-exist, and half of them believe in *us* and the other half don't – do we exist or don't we? Or do we half-exist for the Counter-Earthlings we believe in but only half of them believe in Earthlings?" He laughed out loud. "You see, Margaret, don't you? It just won't hold water."

Allie said, "You know James, you have a remarkable intuitive grasp of quantum theory."

James said, "Any time I need some grounding, my dear, I just kick a rock."

There was a loud boom and all of them turned to peer out the window, toward Lake Michigan. A great roiling sphere of light and glowing water was rising into the air. At least, that was what it looked like.

"Allie, James," Margaret asked, "was that Lake Michigan boiling just now?"

James said, "Just more fireworks." He pulled his watch from its resting place on his belly then, and studied it.

Meg said, "Excuse me." She crossed the room, turning her back on the windows and the Santas and the seasonal lights, on the display rising over Lake Michigan, and on her own house just across the street and down a little ways.

In the doorway, before leaving the room, she stopped and turned back. Even from where she stood, it was possible to see the window, and beyond the window in the distance the colourful display, and much closer the dark-

ness of her own house.

She stepped from the stone-floored living room into a small foyer. The floor here was flagged as well. The walls were of half-beamed plaster. There was a closet door and there was an outer door. Each was of wood, fitted with antique iron hinges and apparatus, the metal all greened by age or perhaps by the artisan's hand.

She reached for a metallic door handle but an obstacle retarded the movement of her hand. She didn't feel it, at least she didn't feel it at once. She could see it, but she wasn't even sure she could see it. It was vaguely oval or egg-shaped, or probably vaguely oval or egg-shaped, or probably not not-oval or vaguely egg-shaped.

And it was golden, or it was probably golden, or probably not not-golden.

Its edges were fuzzy, and she could see into it, or probably see into it, or probably not not-see into it. People and buildings and furniture and clothing and the sky. It was daytime or probably it was daytime or nighttime or probably probably-not not-day or —

Behind her the booming of fireworks grew louder and she looked around for a clock. It was midnight, or at least it was probably not not-midnight, and it was the new millennium, or at least it was probably the new millennium if everybody in the city of Chicago agreed that it was probably the new millennium here on earth and maybe on Counter-Earth as well, or maybe not.

In New York or maybe San Francisco, James and Allie's grown-up children met them at the airport.

James and Allie's daughter had moved to New York to pursue her career as a designer. She'd got a job, found a loft in Tribeca, run through a series of lovers, become celibate for a year while she cleared her mind and body of distracting influences, resumed dating, made her choice and settled down.

Their son had moved to San Francisco, taken work with an investment firm in the financial district, spent his days at the stock exchange and his nights South of Market trying to decide who he was and what he wanted to do and to achieve in the world. He was at first amazed, then briefly pleased, then profoundly disquieted to learn how many of his fellows shared his own sense of uncertainty.

The huge jet touched down and James and Alicia waited while the flight attendant got their warm coats and hats from the little closet where first-class passengers' outer clothing was stowed during lengthy flights. James had consumed four scotches during the flight, but he walked steadily. Allie had stopped after three. It was a function of body mass, she told him. Your body mass is one-third greater than mine so it will take you four drinks to achieve the same level of anesthesia that I can reach with three.

Their heavy winter footwear sounded hollowly as they made their way up the jetway, no one ahead of them, another perquisite of travelling first-class.

Their son and daughter met them at the gate and they exchanged kisses and embraces. Neither of the younger pair had brought a lover, spouse, or significant other to the airport. They had driven together. Their car was nearby in short-term parking.

Their son went with them to help them ransom their hastily-packed bags while their daughter retrieved the car and brought it to the portico. Their son stowed their bags in the trunk and James and Allie climbed into the back seat of the car. It was a comfortable, full-size sedan.

James grunted, "Nice car. I didn't know they even made these any more."

Their son spoke in fragments. "The police. They said you'd have to. They were here on holiday. Walter and Margaret. Uncle Walter. Aunt Margaret. We had a tree-house. In their backyard. But they wouldn't let us. They said family. We told them. They said we weren't close enough. We didn't. Qualify. Dad. Mom. Aunt Meg's sister. They said. Mom. Can you do it?"

Allie shuddered. "What time is it? I forgot to reset my watch, I'm still on Chicago time."

Their son told her the time. "Morgue. The morgue. Still open."

"Let's go."

James turned to her. "You don't mean that, Alicia. Take us to a hotel, please. Alicia needs a good night's rest. We both do. Then we can go, we can do this in the morning."

"No!" Allie's voice was shrill. There was silence in the car, and for the first time she realized that her daughter had turned on the radio, perhaps to pick up traffic bulletins. Only there was music playing, a soprano saxophone playing Cole Porter's song, "Every Time We Say Good-bye I Die a Little."

Again, James said, "Please, a hotel."

"No," one of their children said, "you won't stay at any hotel. Not now. The least we can do is have you with us. You can use the master bedroom. There will be plenty of room. You have to do this."

"Alicia?"

"All right. Thank you, darling. You are our blessing, you know, the two of you are God's blessing. If only Meg and Walter had had children..." She let out a long sigh that was partly a sob. "But take me to them first. To do my duty. Please, I wouldn't sleep a wink if I knew I had to do this tomorrow. New Year's Day? The new millennium? Let the dying age bury its own dead. Please, James, you don't have to do this, she was my sister, I'll do what has to be done."

With James's assent, they proceeded to the morgue, to perform the heartbreak task of formally identifying the bodies. Walter and Alicia had carried identification with them, it was found on their persons, there was no question, but the law had its requisites.

An hour later, or perhaps two, they sat in a living room, drinks in hand. No one was getting drunk. No one would get drunk. The liquor offered a little warmth; it took the edge off the ice-bladed scalpel cutting Allie's heart, and probably the hearts of the others.

James asked, "What happened?"

The scene at the morgue had at least been mercifully brief. The bodies had been shown to Allie and she had said, "Yes, that is my sister. Yes, that is her husband." And the bodies had been taken away, and Allie had signed a few papers and James and their children took her away as well.

Now James said, "Tell us what happened. We're entitled to know what happened."

James and Alicia's children looked at each other. Then their son spoke.

"It was a fluke. They were in town on vacation. Well, I guess you know that." He had recovered himself sufficiently to speak in full sentences again.

"They were staying in a hotel downtown. They had dinner reservations and then theatre tickets. They kept their dinner reservations. The police verified that. Walter had a card from the restaurant in his pocket and a detective checked and they'd eaten their meal and then the doorman got them a cab to carry them to the theatre. They could have walked, it wasn't far, but it was such a miserable night, cold and wet, they didn't want to do it so they took a cab."

He heaved a sigh.

His sister said, "Do you want me to take over?"

He said, "No, I'll tell them."

She disappeared into the kitchen and started to make coffee.

He said, "Some skell carjacked a fancy sedan a block away. Pointed a gun at the driver and threw him out of the car and took off in it with a woman in the passenger seat and a little dog in the back seat. Woman starts screaming her head off, the dog gets upset and jumps up and sinks its teeth in the back of the jacker's neck."

Allie put her face in her hands, her elbows on her knees.

James sat upright, following the narrative.

"The guy must have been crazy, probably full of crack or PCP, I don't know, the cops said they'd run a test and let us know. For what it's worth."

"I want to know," James said.

"I'll call you," his son replied. Then he resumed the story. "He had to be crazy or hopped-up or both. That time of night, that part of town, this time of year. Especially this year. He had to be crazy. Where did he think he'd get?"

James waited, his expression intent. Alicia pressed the heels of her hands against her temples, then slid them forward again until her face was concealed.

"When the dog bit him in the back of the neck he floored the accelerator. The man who owned the car was running in front of it, waving his hands, trying to flag down the jacker. He ran him right over and accelerated into the intersection. Against the light, of course."

A low moan emerged from between Allie's hands, the hands that covered her face. She could see what was coming. It wasn't hard to see what was coming.

"Uncle Walter and Aunt Meg's cab was just going through the intersection. The car smashed into their cab broadside. It was going so fast by then, the cab flipped over. There was a bus in the next lane. The car crushed the cab against the side of the bus."

He smacked his palms together, unthinkingly adding a sound effect to his story. He realized what he'd done and stood staring at his hands as he held them in front of his chest.

"The carjacker was killed. He went through the windshield and was cut to ribbons. He'd already killed the owner of the car. The woman in the passenger seat died in the crash. Walter and Meg died. The cab driver died. No one on the bus was seriously injured. The little dog was okay."

Allie's shoulders rose and fell, rose and fell. Racking sounds came from between her hands. Her husband, James, put his arms around her and drew her to him. She hid her face in his shirt.

James said, "We'll have to arrange the funeral. Alicia can decide what she wants to do, ship the remains back to Chicago or bury them here."

Their daughter had returned to the room halfway through her brother's narration, when she had volunteered to take over the task. Now she said, "There's coffee, tea, I made sandwiches." She refrained from making an hysterical joke about airplane food and airline service.

Allie shook her head negatively.

James said, "I think you should have something, Alicia. Some little something. You need nourishment."

"I just keep thinking," their daughter said, "it was such a crazy accident. If they'd stayed at the restaurant five minutes longer. Thirty seconds longer! If they'd decided to have another cup of coffee. If they'd stopped to use the rest room. Or if they'd left the restaurant five minutes sooner. Or if they'd decided to walk to the theatre. If they hadn't been able to get tickets to the show. If their driver had taken a different route. If he'd got stuck at a traffic light in the last block."

Alicia freed herself from her husband's embrace and took a few deliberate steps, left foot, right foot. She stood looking out the window. The streets were full of revellers, celebrants eager to welcome in the new millennium. She saw Richard Nixon wearing a huge rubber head. She saw Medusa with a head full of writhing snakes. She saw a giant blue alien with a globular body covered with artificial cilia.

James and Alicia's daughter had turned on soft music in the house. Somehow it might lessen the deathly stillness and the cold, crushing grief. A torch singer was caressing the lyrics of a little known ballad, "I Don't Want to Cry Anymore."

The blue alien began jumping up and down, bouncing higher with each repetition. Shortly, Richard Nixon and Medusa closed in on him from either side and guided him away.

Alicia returned to the others. "You're right," she told her daughter. "If anything at all had been a little bit different, they would be alive right now. They might have seen the carjacking and they would have a story to tell for years to come. They could have told James and me when they got home. Instead, we'll take them home with us and bury them. I think we should do that. They have no one else. We'll take care of it."

She sank onto the sofa. James held the tray toward her and when she ignored it he lifted a sandwich and put it in her hand. She sat with her eyes fixed on it. The tip of a soya sprout stuck out between the slices of bread. A tiny tremor in her hand made it quiver. It seemed to bounce between two places a tiny fraction of an inch apart.

The music had changed again, to another old song, "The Very Thought of You." She thought of her sister and her sister's husband, of their long love story. Where were they now?

Dead. Nowhere. No one really believed that anything

happened after death, that was a fairy tale for an earlier age, the threat of punishment and promise of reward used by priests to keep their flocks in line. Do as you're told or God will get you.

Nobody knew where anything was. That was the message of modern physics. Of Allie's chosen work. Everything was quanta. A quantum might be here, might be there, but never in-between. A muon here, a boson there, the physical universe had turned into Old MacDonald's farm.

When a particle disappeared, where did it go? Did it cease to exist? Did it pop into another universe?

She stood up again and went back to the window. When she felt a hand on her shoulder she shook it off. She tried to focus on the farthest, dimmest object her eye could discern. In the city sky there was too much glow to see truly faint objects.

She saw something that looked like a glowing oval.

There were forms in it, vague and uncertain. She wiped a tear from her eye and the glowing oval disappeared or perhaps it grew clearer and brighter. A quantum particle might be here or there but never between here and there.

Here or there.

Here or there.

**Richard A. Lupoff** (born 1935) is a veteran American writer whom we are pleased to welcome to the pages of *Interzone* for the first time. His many sf and fantasy novels range from *One Million Centuries* (1967) to *Galaxy's End* (1988). In recent years he has concentrated on crime novels in the "Hobart Lindsey/Marvia Plum" series – *The Comic Book Killer* (1989), *The Classic Car Killer* (1991), *The Bessie Blue Killer* (1994), *The Sepia Siren Killer* (1994), etc. He lives in Berkeley, California.

## THE ARTHUR C. CLARKE AWARD 1999



Among the nominees who attended the ceremony were: above, Alison Sinclair; below, Chris Priest, seen here with his wife Leigh Kennedy; and top right, Ken Macleod.



Above: Tricia Sullivan, winner of the 1999 Arthur C. Clarke Award



Right: David Pringle (right) receives his special BSFA award from Stephen Baxter.



“Literary fiction tells one whopping great lie,” says Simon Ings. It’s a bold statement by the author of cyberpunk novels such as *Headlong* and *Hotwire*.

An even bolder one if you consider that Ings’s credentials include writing a review of the colour blue for an interior-decorating magazine. So what is this lie? “It’s that love of people is more important than love of machines.” He speaks with great passion. “How many people do you know who spend more time on their relationship than on trying to afford their next car? We get a relationship, we work at it – and then we let it sour and decay. And meanwhile we try to get the next house and the next car and the next video and the next toy...

“We love our toys so much and literary fiction doesn’t often touch on this, mainly because it doesn’t have the tools to do it. Science fiction, on the other hand, is actually good at that. Summing a book up is always an invidious business, but *Headlong* is about someone who thought he was superhuman because he had extra powers who then loses them. When he becomes superhuman there’s a medical and economic institution around him saying, ‘This is what we want you to become, and this is good. And you can have all those nice toys.’

“Then he has to become human again without any help. Suddenly my hero finds himself only being able to see in black and white because he’s had so many other possibilities of seeing colour that the idea of colour vision is a bit of a waste of time. No one’s saying how great it is to be a person. The whole world is frantically trying to become what he was and he has to go in the opposite direction. Becoming human again is as frightening a journey as becoming superhuman. Part of that progress is to discover that if you’re acquiring extra senses and extra powers, you’re actually letting lie fallow certain human skills and traits, among them compassion, possibly. That’s one of the ones that Yale suffers from. He’s the hero of *Headlong*, an ordinary, middle-class, woolly-minded, *Guardian*-reading New Man bloke. He’s had the toys, the palace in his head that lets him connect with other people and create with his mind, and he’s lost them. All of a sudden he has to become an action hero, if only to find out why his estranged wife has died and if he’s next in line. What he uncovers, apart from anything else, is that he’s not that nice. There are unpleasant elements in his character that he’s never actually had to address because he’s always had a very civilized, comfortable life and

now he’s not leading a civilized, comfortable life. Suddenly he’s up against things like the fact that he’s actually quite violent. He’s particularly nasty to one young woman whom he hits for no reason whatsoever. It’s his one act as an action hero: striking a woman in the mouth through frustration, but he’s never been that frustrated before. He’s never had to learn how to deal with it. He’s so used to looking at the full gamma spectrum and smelling magnetism that he’s let all the other senses go by the board.

“There’s a little bit on the Moon about the development of his sexuality and there is another dimension to sexuality when you become telepathic, when you become a group mind. There is something new and special and legitimate going on. But it’s also very infantile. It’s more about curiosity than it is about commitment. It’s actually not very adult at all. If the specialness is taken away from you, what are you left with but the sexuality of a curious 11-year-old? It’s a recipe for infantilism. People suddenly find themselves in their own skulls again and not in each other’s, and it is a fall from some sort of grace – but probably some sort of artificial grace. But what’s the point in a man-made heaven? And I do mean *man*. What’s the point in an artificial heaven if rotten people can get there because they’ve got the cash?”

That doesn’t mean Ings’s latest novel is only a work of moral philosophy. There’s a fast-paced plot which carries the ideas. The author says, “With *Headlong* I wanted to write a *noir* thriller, not wanting my hero just to be a private eye, but an ordinary person who becomes a private eye for his own reasons and who suddenly finds it’s not that easy. To an extent it’s about people trying to find new roles for themselves and being terribly aware of what it is that they’re doing. So there are *mafiosi* in this book who are frighteningly aware that they’re Mafia. They’re frighteningly aware of the right cars to drive and what suits to wear and all the rest of it. But actually the Mafia are like that. They really are that taken with their own image.”

How does Ings know?

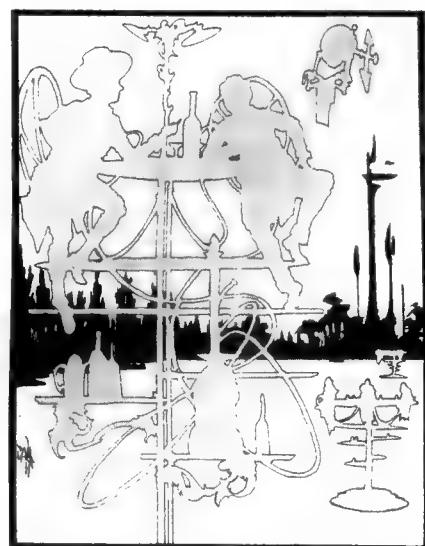
“Because I’ve met a couple who murdered my girlfriend’s uncle, as it turned out years later, which is why I take the crime genre particularly seriously. I’ve also met drug-dealers in Glasgow who

# A Lead-lined Window On Hell

**Simon Ings**

interviewed by

Anne Gay



wear kipper-ties because they saw one too many films in the 1970s.

"It's all to do with movement of money, so my next book is partly about that. It's called *Painkillers* and one of its themes is the new crime economy. What's interesting about the global economy at the moment is that it's more or less crime-led. Two thirds of Japanese defaulting bank-loans are due to early-90s criminal recession, so moving into crime wasn't just a stylistic choice for me. It's an area I feel drawn to for personal reasons as well, I guess, maybe because it's a way of taking some of the characteristics of science fiction – the loner, the alienated environment – and applying them to something that you can research, something that you can actually understand psychologically and get some insight into. With *Headlong*, though, I wanted to tip my hat to the *noir* thriller. It's saying goodbye to all those lovely toys and finding out they probably weren't worth it in the first place. It's saying goodbye to a relationship that broke up probably for no good reason other than the fact you're just confused. There is no way that *Headlong* would work if it had a likeable hero because there would be no point. If Yale comes over as sympathetic but flawed, I've done my job and I'm pleased about it, but I think in the end what stops *Headlong* from being a screenplay rather than a novel is the fact that it's a very melancholy book."

Ings knows about screenplays. "I was doing a little bit of film work about three years ago and I did a film course at the British Film Institute which was really exciting. It wasn't a practical course. It was about the theory of making film, which is absolutely brilliant if you're writing screenplays, because you're then looking at theories of narrative and the way meaning is structured in film. It's like this instant translating tool that you can apply. When I arrived there I was just doing the usual drivel that most writers come out with, because how would they know otherwise? You know, 'I think my work is very suited to film because I think visually.' Poets think visually. Songwriters think visually. Everyone thinks visually, for heaven's sake, unless they've been blind from birth. The whole point about writing screenplays is that they're not visual. That's someone else's job. They're just narrative. No tone of voice. No scene-setting, no trendy lighting effects, no gift of the gab, no personal language, just narrative and dialogue, and please,

not too much dialogue because it's expensive, or at least it is when you're working with the sorts of films I was. It was a tiny little thing. I did write a feature which I was paid for but it never got made. That's my entire experience."

Another string to Ings' bow is that he writes for style magazines. He says, "Yeah, I do work for *Vogue*. I sub-edit for them and I write reviews for *World of Interiors* now and again. What can I say? I wrote 50 letters to magazines. These guys replied. It's very straightforward. I worked as a proof-reader at night for a couple of years and subbing is just proof-reading with a bit of *nous* about how to cut copy back. Once you're in there it's fairly easy to find something that you're really interested in. People are only too happy to let you have a go and write a review and all the rest of it. In fact that's how I ended up writing for *New Scientist*. Partly it was proximity, in that *New Scientist* was two floors down from *TV Times* where I was working, and partly because a guy I know along my road was a professional artist and lost half his brain to a cold-sore. His name's David Jane. He's now an extremely successful artist of his own brain-scans so how's that for sub-cortical? Stick the two together and you've got your first article for *New Scientist* and reviews for as long as they can stand you.

"I have a strange perspective on those little quotes they put on the back of books. Readers generally assume that you'll be very cynical or embarrassed about them, but there's actually nothing nicer as a reviewer than having your review on the back of a book. I have this sort of vicarious 'Ah, my child!' It's like, 'Those words

"...Was I going to get down and write this blessed first novel or was I going to work still in this acting troupe?" Not the troupe in question, this is Colin Greenland, Geoff Ryman and Simon Ings performing *The Unauthorised Sex Company* at Mexicon IV in 1991.



on the back, those are mine! I like this book. Look!" Ings also gets punchy cover-quotes on the back of his own books. *Dazed and Confused* described him as "sf's hippest star."

"That was great fun," he says. "I've done some work for them in the past. They're this strange sort of style magazine, Soho-ish, or Hoxton-ish, who don't pay. Somebody must be earning money from it, but they don't pay so the idea of taking such a splendid pull-quote from *Dazed and Confused* is quite nice in lieu of hard cash. So if I've pleased a *Dazed and Confused* copywriter, even if only for a couple of seconds, I'm happy. Being described as 'sf's hippest star' was great, but what is a hip science-fiction writer? Someone who doesn't drool on the carpet too often. Somehow writers themselves are not the hippest people out. We might like to pretend we're rock stars but really we're not."

So why does he write? "Because I need to spend large numbers of hours sitting in a hole in the ground with my own head," he jokes. "No, seriously, there was a very brief time where I had a sort of choice. Was I going to get down and write this blessed first novel or was I going to work still in this acting troupe? I chose to write, and even now I sometimes wake up and think, 'Why on earth did you decide to avoid people at such a major level?' And I have really no good answer except that it's what I'm good at."

How did he know if he'd never done it? Ings smiles. "I've always done it. I learned to read when I was young – I don't know, three, four. I learned fairly rapidly and immediately wanted to write. What keeps me writing is actually not the writing, it's to make the most beautiful things I can. It's applying that to something that people find real and that I find interesting, trying to get the plug in the socket. That's what keeps me engaged with it, I guess."

"Writing's what I've always wanted to do. Instead of doing the sensible thing, which is to have a real life and to write from the experience, I've always written and sort of had the real life in the interstices of that, which is probably why I have this rather eccentric and actually quite bleak view of writing, if not of life. But I just did whatever I could to make my money. I moved to Bradford to be poor and write, which is a very typical 20-something middle-class doesn't-quite-know-how-the-world-works thing to do. I was working in a double-glazing factory, and sure enough the nice middle-class boy who goes to try and live poor and write in his spare time soon discovers that the economy doesn't work like that. If you

move to a poor area you're working all the hours God sends in order to be poor. That is why it is a poor area. Although I have to say that Bradford is full of people like that, who've made the same stupid mistake I made.

"Starving in a garret is not what it's cracked up to be. It's bad for the head because what it basically says is, 'One day my prince will come,' and if you have that attitude, he never will. It's all very well having a healthy idea of your own skills and your own strengths, but to blame the world for the fact that you're not earning a living is a really bad way of doing good art. If what you do as an artist isn't enough to put bread and butter in front of you, how much other value could it possibly have? If you can't do that one simple thing in the world, it's probably very odd and probably, however beautiful, not a great deal of use to people and I think books should be of use to people. It doesn't have to be a practical use. Science fiction doesn't have to teach the physical constants or anything. Books don't have to be moral but I think you can ask a question that you think other people will be interested in and work it out as well as you can. It seems a good use to me."

"But I was really lucky. My first book got published by the very first company I sent it to. It was my first novel, and the first novel I'd ever written, and it got taken up more or less straight away. Unfortunately so did Unwin Hyman. They were bought up by Harper, so I had to wait 18 months before the blessed thing came out, but I sold it almost straight away which was amazing. That's good and bad. The good thing is that I was published

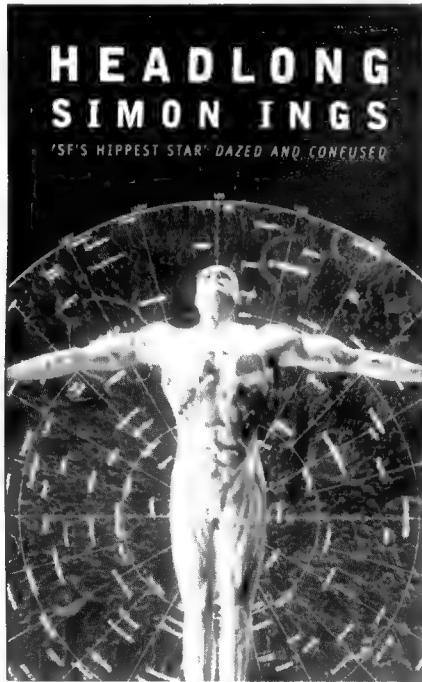
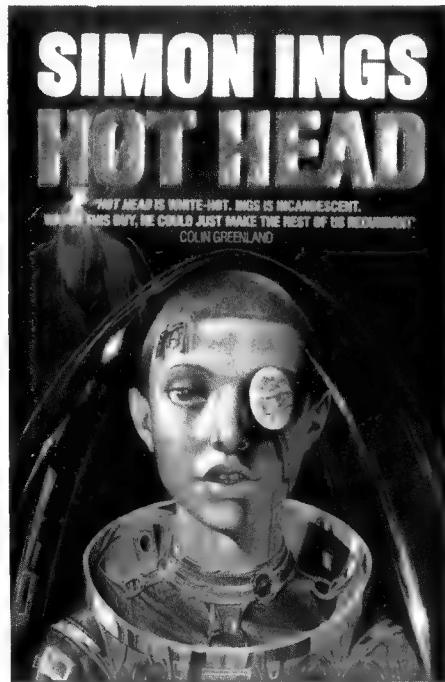
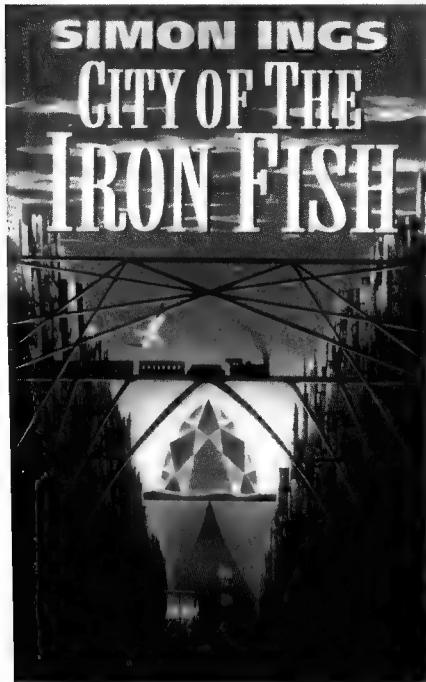


when I was young. I've been out there, I've been taking the criticism, I've been seeing how the business works so I've got a very good idea of what I want to do and very realistic expectations of what I'm going to get from it. The downside, the challenging bit if you like, is that I've grown up in public. I haven't had those four unpublished novels that Iain Banks had before he published the fifth, so you have *City of the Iron Fish* which is an attempt to write a fantasy novel about Picasso, not the smartest move I've ever made; *Hotwire*, where large portions of it are in disguised iambic pentameter, also a slightly bad decision, so any reader that's actually followed what I've done,

I have nothing but admiration for. How they've staggered through so many different odd directions that I've taken before finding what I want to do is quite impressive really. They're lovely people – or they need help!"

"Seriously though, I think that the moment you stop learning, or you stop trying to do something difficult, is the day you should really go and do something else. I think there are writers who are so good that they actually run out of challenges. I think it happened with H. E. Bates, who wrote the best stories in the English language. You can tell almost to the month when he went off and became glib, because whatever he set himself to write in short-story form he could do and do perfectly. My God! There are plenty of writers in other genres who are writing the same thing over and over again and that depresses the hell out of me. I can't imagine a more useless waste of a life. Because sf publishers encourage the overproduction of work, I think a lot of us slip into glibness long before we ought to, simply because we're writing too much. We haven't got the time to set ourselves the right challenges. I send my publishers spare by taking a long time to write each book but I'm trying to learn and do different things each time."

Ings says with a quiet sense of achievement, "I know what I want to do now, which is to write thrillers with science-fiction content that will satisfy the sf readers – I'm very happy to be a science-fiction writer – but can appeal to a broader audience as well. Audiences are pretty sophisticated when it comes to reading sf now. They have to be because they're



living in our sort of environment. So Thomas Disch is right. He said in a book with a wonderful title, *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of*, that science fiction shaped the way we live and every one of us had to catch up. So that's the audience I'd like to write more for. Disch is a very good example of the sf writer who writes sf as long as it's sensible for him as a writer to do so, but goes on 'to do other things as well as he gets older.

"I think science fiction is at its best when it writes about children, because then you're not having to convey a sophisticated adult view of the alien world we're putting over. If you try and do that, you've got barely room for plot, let alone character, and that's why so often sf has bad character: it's got so much information to put over that they've hardly got room to breathe. As I get older I get better at character and more and more frustrated with science fiction as a form that's stopping me from writing about character.

"What I'm doing now is moving more in that direction. A story I'm working on at the moment is about a personality disorder, so I've just got in contact with a clinical psychologist who works with the worst of the worst in Brixton prison. These are not very cultured, clever psychopaths. These people are just not very nice. It's extremely frightening and I do get nightmares, but it is something that you can test against reality. They're scary and the other thing is that they're in fear of their lives. They know that they're horrible and they make certain that you know that they're horrible. It's messy. At the moment what I'm finding a way through to is to take a really popular medical, neurological, psychological trope that seems to have been done to death and actually learn something about it, so that *Painkillers* for example involves a man's hunt for treatment for his son's autism. It's not the sort of autism where you can paint a perfect picture, you can count all the toothpicks on the floor. It's autism as scratching your nails down the blackboard forever. It's autism as a painful neurological condition that prevents you from hearing the first 30 seconds of everything everybody says because it's like a bell ringing in your head. I suppose what I come back to is Phil Dick's interest in empathy. It's the fact that we've had millions of years of evolution designed to let us get on with each other. Then you meet an autistic child and you soon find out how special and wonderful it is to be human. Just imagine spending the whole of your life being unable to tell the difference between your parents and moving furniture!

"Hopefully I can do something new

with awareness of personality disorders. This is what I want to explore now. People are interested in this stuff but they're quite often short-changed by the work that's available. Partly that's because films have to be reasonably positive to apply to 40 million people. Books don't have to. Books don't have to be read by 40 million people so you can be slightly more realistic and if that means darker and slightly more melancholy, so be it. When I quit acting I'd more or less decided that it was a bad 30-minute holo-deck training session for real life, to quote those wonderful Heaven's Gate people who came to such a sad end when they decided that their spaceship had already arrived in Hale-Bopp. You're kept in a state of perpetual shallowness by the industry. I mean, every industry takes something out of you and with acting it's that.

"With writing I suppose what the industry takes out of you is a sense of control over your own destiny. You're so separated from the means of production and from the perception of your work that frankly I'm amazed that writers aren't more paranoid. My dear publisher, Jane Johnson, writes in her local paper about how she thinks all writers are mad and they're not doing terribly well. They're all sitting at home and aren't writers awful. I've got news for her. She doesn't know the half of it! In that comment she opened a small, a very small, lead-lined window on Hell, which is a view of the writer's life. It is very peculiar. I didn't realize the extent to which writers would be separated from their audience because I've always been very pally. It never occurred to me that writing novels would be such a lonely business. It really is, and this is what's so nice now in that I'm living with another writer. People say 'Isn't that really hard?' And it's like 'No! My God, it's why I'm here today! That's why I haven't got my mouth propped under the beer-tap right now!'

"When I was a kid, at first I was living on this tasteless bit of ribbon development called Horndean. It was a concrete island. You know, it was a pure Ballardian childhood living on that main road in the middle of the country, which is quite eerie. I was alienated from the world on a piece of ribbon development with hardly anyone around, so it's a pretty good recipe for finding your entertainment and your companionship and most of what you need from books.

"Now I'm living in Peckham, in a one-bedroom flat. I'm pretty disciplined. I don't write every day. I spend a long time planning a book and I can go for months without writing as a consequence. Anna and I have our separate rooms, which is very good. When

I'm planning and not getting anything done, I hear Anna's typewriter in the next room. It drives me to despair, anxiety, and self-hatred. And I go back to planning. Then I will write longhand in a cafe because it's relaxing and it takes all the pressure off. I can feel like a real writer in a black turtleneck and everything. I use a computer for editing hugely, and I do edit a lot because I write nice sentences and they take work. I do 3,000 words a day, and I can do that happily five days a week. I can polish off a first draft quite happily in a couple of months. Then the rewrite takes forever.

"Ideas bite when they bite and you work around it, so if you've got nothing better to do there is no point wandering around with your head in your hands going 'I've got a block! I've got a block!' I've never had a block in my life, but that's mainly because if I'm supposed to be writing a novel and I haven't got one, I go and do something else instead like a screenplay or some short stories. Or just play, because I think what's really important with anything is that professional anxieties must not intrude on the enjoyable bit of the job. I'm very good at finding things to play at. And guess what? Science fiction is an absolutely brilliantly-fashioned escape hatch."

*Headlong* is published by Voyager at £5.99.

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# Death of the Mocking Man

*Garry Kilworth*

**M**ai Song was twelve years of age when the mocking man first appeared at her side. "You are the daughter of an impoverished war lord," he sneered. "You will never amount to anything." The mocking man repeated this prophecy time and time again. Terrified of the strange apparition at first, she became used to it suddenly materializing by her side when she was alone. One day, while she was at target practice with her bow and quiver of arrows, she responded with spirit.

"I am not concerned about riches or fame," she replied, "so long as I find happiness."

The mocking man laughed in a particularly offensive manner.

"Happiness too will be beyond your grasp, if I have anything to do with it."

Mai Song was an accomplished archer. She could hit a knotted clout at a hundred paces with the bow her father had given her. However, her next shot missed the target. The mocking man laughed in glee.

Thereafter the mocking man was always there, at crucial times, to denigrate her. He jeered at her efforts to paint beautiful watercolours of the firs clinging to the crags of Guilin's hills, telling her that mud splashed on walls by the wheels of ox-carts was more artistic. He called her horse, the beast she loved, a shambling monster. He said she rode it like a frog rode a lump of driftwood floating on scummy pond. Her efforts at Chinese characters, the lovely picture-language of her nation, he



said were pathetic and corrupt, and therefore meaningless. Everything and anything she did was ridiculed by the mocking man, until the princess felt she was totally unworthy. She might have been utterly and hopelessly miserable if she had not a companion, a talking crane which landed in the courtyard of the garden on the odd frosty morning, and who told her she was estimable.

"Do not listen to the mocking man," the white crane told her, as it took fish from the lily pond, "he is trying to break your spirit."

It upset Mai Song's father to lose his precious goldfishes, but Mai Song told her father cranes had to eat just as people did. Moreover, when the white crane was in evidence, the mocking man stayed away.

Mai Song's home was alive with mosquitoes and bog rats, snakes and leeches. Mai Song lived in a bamboo castle on the edge of the marsh country over which her father ruled. The war lord's subjects were mostly poor

fishermen who scraped a living from the shallow waters of the swamp, or hunters of small birds and game in the bogs and fens. These people lived for the best part in rickety houses on stilts, though some had to use their small fishing rafts as their places of rest. They gave no money to their lord because they had none. He and his small contingent of soldiers provided protection for these people from the bandits who were the scourge of the water margin. The war lord was paid in kind: fish and fowl mostly, but sometimes with manual labour. In this way he maintained his bamboo castle and fed himself and his daughter, his wife being long dead from swamp fever.

Sometimes there would pass by her father's castle the troops and retinues of rich and powerful war lords. She would glimpse silk banners in the distance, fluttering like trapped birds on the tips of tall lances. Then knights in bright metal would appear under them, as they reached the crest of rising ground. They would be riding magnificent chargers: black, white and dappled, dripping with curtains of flank armour, their brown eyes peering through dark holes in satin hoods. Behind the cavalry the foot soldiers would come, their heads high, green plumes spouting from their helmets like fountains of liquid jade, *chinking* and *clinking* as they marched over the soft marshy earth.

In the centre of this long lizard of metalled military rode a large arrogant man, sitting tall on his goatskin saddle, his eyes like flint arrowheads. This was the war lord himself, surrounded by strolling figures in silk robes: scribes, overseers, body-servants, grooms, cup-bearers, and sometimes, a sorcerer. Following the war lord was often a brocade-covered litter, behind which sat the war lord's wife or daughter. This person sometimes drew back the rich folds of the litter's drapes to peer out at Mai Song who stood on the battlements of her father's wooden fort watching the carnival go by. The eyes of these women and girls were full of disdain for the young child behind the bamboo spikes. When she grew older they glanced at her close-cropped hair and often mistook her for a kitchen boy, dismissing her at once in a single indifferent glance.

But sometimes a sorcerer!

Yes, it must have been a sorcerer, accompanying a war lord, who was responsible for the mocking man. Just before her twelfth birthday Mai Song had been standing on the battlements as she usually did, watching a parade of soldiers go by, when she happened to stare at a young man of some 14 winters who had eyes like a snake. He stared back, it seemed belligerently, as if he were offended by her interest in him. When her eyes did not waver this youthful wizard wafted the air with his right hand, no doubt leaving a curse on the child.

The mocking man was not real of course, being simply an image in the likeness of a young man. Though the mocking man's features were not at all clear, being shrouded in a misty darkness which clung to his form, Mai Song got the impression that he was not more than 18 years of age, a petulant youth with a crescent red mouth that curved up on either side of a lean nose. His hair was long and lank, hanging down to his waist. He wore a silk gown covered in strange symbols and leather sandals with gold buckles on his feet.

The mocking man was invisible and silent to all but Mai Song. The war lord thought his daughter was quietly mad, but did not blame his child for that, given the environment in which she had been raised.

One day when she had grown into a woman Mai Song was playing mah jong (which is called *mah jeuk* in the local dialect) when a prince rode by the castle. This prince had no bodyguard of shining soldiers, no litter, no fung shui man or sorcerer accompanying him. He was entirely alone, the prey of bandits and rogue war lords along the water margin. This prince called up to Mai Song and asked her if he might spend the night at the castle. She replied that she would have to ask her father, who was the war lord, but thought the answer would be yes.

That evening the prince dined with Mai Song and the war lord. The prince's name was Pang Yau (which means "friend") and his father was the King of Gwong-dong, one of the most wealthy and powerful regions in all China. Mai Song felt instinctively that though his father had the reputation of being a tyrant, Prince Pang Yau was a good man.

The prince radiated goodness from his face, his hands, his feet. He smiled at her all the time, his hazel eyes twinkling, and once during the meal he 'accidentally' touched her hand with his fingertips. A dramatic thrill went through Mai Song.

The mocking man appeared and on seeing her expression, laughed at her.

"Do you honestly think you could capture the heart of a man like this? A woman whose hands are rough with washing dishes because her father cannot afford a scullery maid? A sweeper of floors? Why this is a young fine prince from a wealthy family. He would not look twice at you if you were not the only woman for a hundred miles."

She thought this was probably true. Mai Song knew that men who went into regions where females were scarce thought the first woman they saw on returning to their homeland was beautiful.

Before he left in the morning, Prince Pang Yau asked the war lord's permission to return once his visit to a far country was over.

"I shall tell you my reason," said the prince. "I have fallen in love with your daughter, Mai Song."

The war lord was dubious about this match. "Mai Song is pretty, I grant you – but not beautiful. You are still a very young man. You may yet see other women in this far country who appeal to you more."

The prince shook his head solemnly. "I am not as fickle as you believe me to be. I have seen many beautiful women. My father's palace is full of them. My father gathers them in droves from his kingdom and parades them before me. Mai Song is pretty, but that is not why I have fallen in love with her. I have fortunately – though sometimes it is a curse – been born with insight – and she has the most gentle and lovely spirit I have ever encountered in any woman. It is *her* I love, not her looks, though I am grateful for her pleasant features too."

When Mai Song heard what the young prince had said her heart soared. She ran to the prince and proclaimed her love for him. She was gratified to see he was burst-

ing with happiness at this news. They strolled outside the castle walls, holding hands, along the banks of the marsh. For the first time she saw beauty in the still waters of the swamp: dragonflies hovered like chips of lapis lazuli above the surface; reed warblers swayed on the rushes and sang high sweet notes to her; emerald lizards and small marsh frogs flashed their green in the sun.

Once the prince had left her side Mai Song took her turn to sneer back at the mocking man.

"Not fit for a prince? Perhaps. But this prince looks beyond my menial surroundings, my poor upbringing. He sees someone who could love him better than any other. You shall not put me down in this matter. When Pang Yau returns, I shall marry him."

"If he returns," derided the mocking man, his mouth curved downwards for once. "Perhaps I can do something about that!"

Fear for the prince's well-being struck Mai Song deep in the heart like a sword. She said nothing more to the mocking man, for she remembered that he was in effect a sorcerer's image. She had no doubt that all that went on inside the bamboo castle was known to the sorcerer himself. Running to the battlements she managed to shout a warning to the prince, as he rode away, but her words were lost on the wind. He turned in his saddle and waved back at her, no doubt thinking she was wishing him a good journey and a safe return to her side.

For many months Mai Song waited for her prince to come. He had promised to return within two, but six, then eight months passed by. No letter came. No messenger arrived. The mocking man crowed.

Finally, the terrible news came with a passing pedlar. Prince Pang Yau had been captured and imprisoned by a powerful wizard in the north of China. The prince was being held in a high tower in a castle with only a single door and no windows. The prince's father had sent his own sorcerer with an army to attempt to free the youth, but all the soldiers in the world could not get inside the impregnable fortress, and the king's sorcerer failed in his bid to force an opening. It was said that the wizard inside the castle was feeding on the goodness of the prince and growing stronger for it.

"Prince Pang Yau is like some tethered cow, which is bled and milked each day for its nourishment. The prince's spirit regenerates, just as do blood and milk. So the wicked sorcerer need never go outside, need never seek food elsewhere. However, since he now lives in darkness, the sorcerer has become part of the darkness itself. Should he ever be subject to the light of day he might vanish in its brightness."

"Why not just knock down the walls?" asked the war lord, grieving along with his daughter. "Why not smash it to pieces?"

The pedlar shrugged, as he wrapped his pots and pans in oiled rags, and fitted them to the frame which he carried on his back.

"Why not indeed? But the castle is immensely strong. Such a feat is not possible. The blocks of stone of which the walls are made are each as large as a house. There is no machine known to man which could breach such

walls. And even if one could, how would you ensure the survival of the prince? If but one should fall on the prince, he would be crushed. I have no doubt the sorcerer moves the prince around, within the walls, so that those on the outside never know exactly where the young man is located. It is a grave problem, which has all the wise men in the kingdom pacing the floor of nights."

"And the door?"

"The door too, is made of huge grey slabs of slate, with a great iron lock the intricate works of which have defeated even the most superb locksmith. They say the key itself weighs more than a man, and is of such complex design that craftsmen of the first order could not even imagine the amazing twists and turns it takes. No, no, I am afraid the prince has been incarcerated until he dies. It is a sad and shocking story."

Of course, Mai Song wept. The mocking man made much of this, saying she could sob until the swallows stayed for the winter, she would not see her prince again. Once she had cried enough, however, she sat down and thought about the problem. If the King of Gwongdong's wizard had not been able to release Pang Yau then Mai Song saw little point in appealing to sorcerers. Wizards worked for money, power or position, not for love, and the king had presumably offered the first three in order to have his son released. There had to be another way. The next time she saw the white crane, she asked the creature if he could help.

"I don't envy your situation," said the crane, spearing one of her favourite goldfish, "but I do have some advice. This is a very powerful sorcerer who has your young man in captivity. I can understand why it is difficult to find another wizard to go against him. However, you can go in search of your own magic, young woman. If you do break into the sorcerer's castle, do so during the day, when he will be rendered helpless."

Mai Song thanked the white crane for his advice, but asked, "Where will I find such magic?"

"Everyone knows," said the crane, "that magic can be found in the bones of dragons. All the dragons are now gone, but their skeletons remain, hidden in various crevices. Dragons are born of fire, in the hearts of volcanoes, and there they go to die. Their bones turn to glass in the great heat and the glass has magical properties. I know of at least one volcano not a thousand miles from here which secretes the bones of a dragon..."

And the white crane told her the name of the volcano and where she might find the glass bones of a dead dragon.

Mai Song was sad to hear that all the dragons were dead, for Chinese dragons were beneficent creatures. Manifestations of the wind they brought waves of harmony to the world when they flew through the air. They had great wisdom. Dragons were quick-witted and swift to understand. The earth was poorer for their passing.

Mai Song went to her father.

"The white crane said *everyone* knew about dragon's bones, but I didn't."

"Neither did I, daughter, but then we live on the edge of nowhere and though everyone else might know, we are ignorant of such commonly recognized facts."

Mai Song then told her father she wished to go on a

quest to find the bones of a dragon.

The war lord was dreadfully unhappy. "How can I let my only daughter, an innocent child, go out into the wilderness? You have hardly been outside the walls of the castle, except to take part in the peasant festivals and harvest blessings. There are vicious bandits out there, and giants, and lone monsters who would eat you whole at one swallow. I must go myself."

"No," replied Mai Song, "you must not. I must go. I love Pang Yau and it must be me who saves him from death in the hands of the dark sorcerer."

The mocking man instantly appeared by her side. "You?" he scoffed. "You are but a mere girl, a piece of pink ribbon, an empty-headed female. How could you even imagine you are strong or wise enough to save this prince?"

"Go away," said Mai Song, coldly. "You are nothing to me any longer. Once you were the only companion I had, but now I have someone I love, and who loves me, and you are unnecessary."

The mocking man gave her an angry look before vanishing.

"Who are you talking to, daughter?" asked the war lord. "This business has turned your mind. Let me go instead, I beg of you. I am a man, used to bearing arms and fighting with the forces of evil. You are but a young woman. I do not want to lose you, daughter. You are all I have left of your mother, whom I loved dearly."

But Mai Song would not hear of her father taking her place. Instead she asked to borrow his black-and-gold armour, which he wore when he went to battle against the enemies of the marsh people. Her father gladly loaned it to her, along with his sword and his charger. Mai Song needed to pad her limbs and torso, to make the armour fit. Once she was accoutred she set forth on the charger, heading north towards the great volcano the crane had told her about.

Her first night out in the open was not easy. She was unused to raw weather and became damp and cold in the exposed conditions. Mai Song soon learned however, and thereafter sought the shelter of rock overhangs, or gullies, or copses. She found soft mossy banks on which to rest, taught herself how to construct bivouacs and soon became proficient at making fires. She had never lacked hunting skills and had always been good around the marshes of the castle with her little bow. Small mammals were her main fare, and plump birds, supplemented by wild vegetables. There were herbs and spices growing free in the wilderness, which made her meals that much more appetizing and nourishing. Gradually, over the days, her physical condition hardened and her mind quickened.

Her father's armour was heavy and chafed her elbows, neck and knees, but she told herself she must get used to that. If she were to be confronted by a foe, she would need to look fearsome, and so had to wear the metal except when sleeping. Her horse was the most important thing in the world to her and she made sure it was fed and watered, groomed and blanketed, even before taking care of herself. This was not just because she had a love of the beasts, but was wise husbandry. Without her horse she would doubtless not survive for very long.

Mai Song's first enemy was a giant who lived in a limestone cave she hoped to use as a night shelter.

The giant was tall and naked, wearing only a gigantic helmet on his head, his body being covered in long hair. His nose was a snout, much like that of a pig's, and his feet were huge and spreading. He came out of the cave at a rush, roaring obscenities and threats.

The mocking man appeared for a few moments.

"Now you're for it," he crowed. "You'll be spitted on that monster's teeth before long."

Mai Song ignored the mocking man, speaking instead to the onrushing giant.

"What are you getting in a fuss about?" she enquired. "I only wish to share your cave for the night."

The giant skidded to a halt and stared, then said in thick husky accents, "You have the voice of a young woman."

"That's because I am a young woman."

The giant smiled lasciviously at this, having little enough sense or guile to keep his face clean of his thoughts.

"Why, then you can certainly share my cave with me."

Mai Song made a fire in the cave, since the giant had never known how to work such common wonders. Later, while he stared at her across the flames, she took two of the broken boughs she was using for logs and sharpened the ends with her sword.

"What are you doing?" asked the giant.

"These?" she laughed. "Don't you know that wood burns better when one end of the log has been cut to a point? We shall need these to start the fire again from its embers, tomorrow morning."

"I knew that," muttered the giant with a scowl, "I just wanted to make sure you did."

Mai Song slept fitfully in her armour, keeping her sword by her side, while the giant lay awake, his milky eyes on her form. In the early hours she was woken by the giant shaking her shoulders. Sitting up she saw that her sword was on the other side of the cave.

"Wake up," growled the giant, his voice thick with lust, "I find that I want you."

"Oh that," she laughed. "Just a minute while I put some more wood on the fire. We don't want to be cold, do we?"

She went to the wood pile and picked up the two sharpened stakes. "Oh," she then said, with the two stakes poised above the glowing charcoal, "the fire's a bit low. Can you blow on the embers?"

The giant went down on all fours and started to blow on the coals.

Mai Song quickly rammed the stakes down on the giant's two spread hands, pinning them to the earth. The giant screamed in agony. Mai Song then leaped to snatch up her sword and swiftly decapitated the giant before he could wrench the stakes free.

The giant's head rolled into the fire, his mouth still cursing her. His filthy wild hair was soon in flames, the scorched smell driving her from the cave. Mai Song mounted her charger and sped away, through a low valley. She rode hard and long, but could still hear the giant's severed head shrieking at her from more than a league away.

This was only her first encounter with a problem. In the next few weeks she had to outwit a man-eating tiger

which picked her scent, by laying false trails for the creature to follow. She fought and killed a monster snake, which had wrapped its coils around her steed during the night hours. She had wide raging rivers to cross, chasms to negotiate, wandering hordes to avoid. There were villages where the people were kind to her, and gave her food and shelter, and there were villagers which drove her out with stones and shouts the minute she entered their community. Once she unwisely stayed amongst the bone-urns of a graveyard and someone's ancestor rose up and in hollow accents ordered her to be gone from that sacred place before she was forced to stay there permanently.

There were chill and unfriendly mornings when the isolated shrines to wayfarers' gods were sparkling with frost crystals. There were days when the snow lightly covered the bridges across gullies and hid them from her searching eyes. There were nights when the rain came down in silver torrents from an indifferent moon.

Finally, not long after her encounter with the phantom, Mai Song came in sight of the volcano she sought. But before she could begin to scale its heights she was attacked by a group of bandits, coming out of the east, their banners flying from tall black lances. They wore the red armour of men of the south lands and their steeds were stocky ponies with hairy ankles: sturdy little creatures that could cover rough terrain without injury. The riders were short men, with wide shoulders. The bandits hemmed Mai Song in with spear points, until she called them cowards, thieves and murderers, keeping her voice low and masculine this time.

"We are no thieves," said their chief, furiously. "We are the dispossessed. Once my family had land until a mandarin from the south stole it from us. We are no murderers. We always give our victims a chance to defend themselves against equal odds. We are certainly no cowards, as I shall prove to you in single combat."

With these words the man who led the bandits prepared himself for battle.

The mocking man appeared before Mai Song.

"You easily overcame that oaf of an ogre in the cave because he was stupid, but this youth has brains as well as brawn. I think this time, missy, you have met your match. I shall enjoy seeing your entrails decorate the lance of this bandit chief."

Once again, Mai Song simply ignored the mocking man as if he were not there, and he fumed and fretted, accusing her of incivility and bad manners, before vanishing in a cloud of petulance.

Ringed by the bandits, Mai Song's lack of experience with a blade in battle soon became evident. The bandit chief at first attacked her armour with vigour, causing many dents to appear. But when he saw how inexperienced she was at combat, her wild blows easy to avoid, he was puzzled. What was, quite evidently, a callow youth doing wearing a war lord's armour, wandering around in bandit country? The bandit chief simply began defending himself against the uncontrolled blows she tried to rain down on him in her enthusiasm.

Finally, becoming bored, he disarmed her.

"Let me see the features of one who wears the armour of war lord, but fights like the boy who brings in the kindling," cried the bandit chief. "Let me see your face."

"Let me see yours," retorted Mai Song, snatching her bow from the saddle of her horse. "Don't think because I'm not good at sword play that I can't hit a running rat at 50 paces with this bow."

The bandit chief removed his helmet to reveal the handsome rugged features of a young man.

"I am Chang, of the clan On, whose home was in the far south until his father was killed, his mother raped and murdered, and his home taken from him. Now let us see the stripling behind that armour. Does your father know you are out?"

Mai Song put down her weapon and removed her helmet. "Yes, he does," she replied, furiously, "and he approves."

On Chang had the good grace to gasp on seeing the face of a woman appear, while his men burst out laughing.

Mai Song spent the night with the bandits, sitting talking around a fire. They said they would have offered to help her in her quest, but they could not because the King of Gwongdong was their sworn enemy. He was the one who robbed them of their heritage. "This prince you wish to marry," said On Chang. "He is not a good man. He cannot be, since he is the son of a very bad man."

"A son does not have to be like his father," replied Mai Song, in defence of her lover. "Pang Yau is all goodness – a pacifist. You would know if you met him. Forgive me for my bluntness, but the following is true. You have been forced into the ways of a nomadic warrior: you are a rough man, not used to finer feelings. That is not your fault, but Pang Yau will teach me about art, writing, and philosophy – things you could not understand, with your way of life – having to kill and loot to make a living."

"Well," replied On Chang, generously, "if you believe him to be this – this demi-god of gentleness, then perhaps he is. Maybe we will help you anyway, even though he is the son of a pig."

But Mai Song said she wanted no help. She wished to complete the mission on her own. The next morning she left her horse and armour with the bandits and climbed the volcano. It was sweltering on the volcano, as Mai Song approached the rim, for the cone was still active. Not far down inside the lava bubbled and spat. Huge goblets of molten rock leapt and fell, splattering on the stormy surface of the boiling lake. Liquid stone spurted ribbons of fire across the top of the crater. Mai Song tried to shield her vulnerable eyes from the heat, as she sought the crevice in which the glass bones of the dragon lay.

Finally, she found what she was looking for, but there was very little of the skeleton left. Only three ribs remained. These she gathered in her arms and went back down the slopes of the volcano.

The bandits were intrigued with her discovery. One man among them had been apprentice to a sorcerer, before he was dispossessed. Mai Chang questioned him about the properties of the three ribs.

The man inspected them carefully. "These two bones are from the upper part of the skeleton," he announced, "close to the shoulders. If struck, one of them will shat-

ter all glass within a region of a thousand miles. Similarly, if struck, the note from the second rib will open all locks within a hundred miles. The last rib, the smallest, I recognize immediately. It is the rib from which sprouted the dragon's right wing. If this glass rib is struck, its note will summon the winged horse of Tang. She is the fastest steed in all China and will carry you anywhere you wish to go with the greatest of speed..."

"But," said Mai Song, "how will I know which of the two large ribs will open the lock to my lover's prison? If I strike the wrong rib, the other, being made of glass, will shatter."

The sorcerer's apprentice shrugged in sympathy. "I do not know how you will accomplish your task. The ribs are identical. There is no way you can tell by looking at them, which is the one to shatter glass, and which to open locks. I can't help you. I'm sorry."

On Chang sat with her and pored over the two glass ribs, trying to find some mark or symbol which would give her a clue as to the identity of the magic contained within. After three hours they had exhausted every possibility. Mai Song thanked On Chang for his help. She then struck the small rib with her sword. A high note rang out and the rib immediately shattered into a million fragments.

A whinnying sound was heard on the wind, then suddenly a magnificent horse appeared in the sky, flying down towards the bandit camp. The golden mare with a blonde mane and tail had huge feathered wings on its flanks. The wonderful beast shone in the sun as it swooped to land nearby. Once on the ground it folded its beautiful wings and stood waiting, pawing the ground gently, for its mistress.

Mai Song said goodbye to the bandits. She left them her father's charger, armour and sword, requesting that they be delivered when the bandits next swept by her father's castle on their way to pillaging Gwongdong. On Chang said he would hand them to her father personally. Mai Sang then wished the bandits well in their fight to regain the clan's lands and castle, after which she mounted the great horse of Tang. In her belt were the two glass bones of the dragon, like curved swords one on either hip. Her face was set and purposeful.

Into the air she went, her hair flowing behind her as a stream of jet. High above the plains and fields the flying horse took her, until the world was spread below her. She could see fine brown rivers wriggling like long worms across the land. There were green squares which were the paddy fields of rice plants, and white-tipped mountains in the distance, and rugged wasteland around the water margin. It became colder the closer she went to the sun, which seemed a strange thing to her.

Finally, after a long flight, the mare began to descend. It landed near a dark building made of huge blocks of granite. It was without any windows and there was only one door made of heavy grey slabs of slate. There were no hinges on the door. A flat iron girder halfway down the door, its ends buried in the granite either side of the doorway, held the slate monstrosity in place. There was a massive lock in the middle of this girder, cryptic in design and no doubt in operation.

Mai Song alighted from the horse of Tang. She stood before the sorcerer's castle, with its single high tower, and pondered on her problem. There was no white crane to help her now. Her lover's fate was in her hands and if she failed Pang Yau would remain a prisoner forever, his soul feeding the damned. Mai Song prayed to her gods, especially Wong Tai Sin, the goatboy whose visions had helped many lost spirits. This time however, Wong Tai Sin did not answer the orisons. It might be that he knew the woman already had the answer, if only she could find it deep within her keen brain, recognize it, bring it out into the light.

"You will never find the key," murmured a silky voice near to her ear. "You are a silly woman. Give up now. Go home, live in obscurity, before you make a fool of yourself once more."

She knew the mocking man had appeared again, by her side, but she steadfastly refused to acknowledge his presence. Instead she concentrated on her problem. As she was thinking, she kicked idly at a stone, which shot from her foot and struck another stone. The two rocks cracked together, to fly off in different directions. At that moment Mai Song had the answer and turned to laugh in the mocking man's misty face. "You are the fool," she said. "You spend your whole time trying to destroy me with your bitterness and hate. Well this is the last time I want to see you. Do you understand? To appear before me again would be quite useless. I will never look at you again, nor will I hear your foul tongue. You are dead to me."

The mocking man wailed and rippled away rapidly into the middle distance where he waited to see what would happen.

Mai Song took the two glass ribs from her belt and struck them both together, thus producing a note simultaneously from each rib. Both ribs shattered immediately, but at the same time a loud *CLANK!* came from the key-hole set in the iron bar. The knitted lock had unravelled itself. The great slate door fell forward with a crash, into the dust, leaving the way from Pang Yau's prison wide open. Pang Yau came walking through the doorway to freedom, just as the whole castle began collapsing. It seemed that the slate door had also been the keystone to the ugly construction. It was soon no more than a jumble of blocks lying scattered in the dirt. Mai Song hoped that the sorcerer himself was buried under their weight.

"My darling," said the prince, taking her in his arms, "you passed all the tests with flying colours!"

Mai Song was confused. She pushed Pang Yau out to arm's length. Studying him, he did not look like someone who had been incarcerated in total darkness, within cold stone walls, for many months. He was smiling gently at her, his mouth a curved crescent below his narrow nose. She compared him with the pathetic mocking man, who still stood whining some distance away. The darkness had now blown away from the creature who had tormented her since she was 12 years of age.

The two figures could have been twin brothers, they were so much alike.

"A test?" said Mai Song, in a disbelieving tone. "A test? Where is the dark sorcerer who imprisoned you? Are you trying to tell me there is no such person? Was all

this engineered by you and your father's wizard? I don't understand, Pang Yau."

The prince was too full of himself to notice the dramatic change in her voice and expression.

"I see you have been comparing me with myself!" he said, nodding towards the mocking man. "Yes, I have been with you all along, since I first saw you leaning over the battlements of your father's castle. I fell in love with you then, but there was a problem. My father would not consent to a marriage to a lowly marsh lord's daughter. Only when I agreed to put you through a series of tests did my father agree to even consider the match.

"First I had to try to destroy your will. My father's wizard fashioned an image of me for this purpose, an engine of sorcery which you call the mocking man. It was the mocking man's task to bend you, to try to break your spirit, though I always knew you would win through. We even sent 'hope' in the form of the white crane, for there must always be a tiny fragment of hope around to make the torture complete. Those without hope simply fall into apathy and listlessness. There is no victory for a mocking man in forcing a state of indifference.

"Yet, still you did not succumb to the torment. You battled through as I knew you surely would. I am so proud of you. This last great test, to free me from a sorcerer's power, has lifted you up even higher in my eyes. Not only are you virtuous, but full of courage and ability. You are truly worthy to be the wife of one of the most powerful princes in all China. How could my father have

ever doubted you? I certainly did not."

"I don't know," Mai Song replied, in a quiet determined voice, "but I do know this. I was wrong in my earlier judgement. So very wrong. It is sad, but I find you are your father's son after all."

And with those final words to her erstwhile lover, Mai Chang mounted the great horse of Tang. She left Pang Yau standing on the windy plains. The vestiges of the mocking man moved to clutch at his raiment as swirling mist clings to the bark of trees. Mai Song flew off towards the camp of On Chang the bandit.

It has been the report of those who claim to have seen her since, that the daughter of the war lord joined the bandits in their fight against the King of Gwongdong. It has been said that she ruthlessly slew the king's son in a savage battle on the wilderness beyond the water margin. There are those who say she found love and are ready to swear that the demi-god Wong Tai Sin was a witness at her wedding to On Chang of the bandits.

I am inclined to believe these matters.

**Garry Kilworth's** previous stories for *Interzone* include "The Sculptor" (#60 – winner of our poll as the most popular story of its year), "Fossils" (#69), "Wayang Kulit" (#90) and "The Council of Beasts" (#111). The author of many other works, including numerous children's books and a recent series of adult mainstream novels written as "Garry Douglas," he lives in Essex.

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Because we were unable to shoe-horn Nick Lowe's film column into last month's special Australian issue, this month we bring you two cartons of "Mutant Popcorn" for the price of one...

## Mutant Popcorn

### carton one

Welcome to [www.whatisthepoint.com](http://www.whatisthepoint.com). You're here because you want to know the answer; because you've had a disturbing feeling that the films you've been watching recently have been trying to tell you something about reality. "I know why you're here," says Laurence Fishburne's grand expositor in *The Matrix*: "why you hardly sleep, why you sit up night after night looking at your computer. You've felt it your entire life – that there's something wrong with the world." (Score zero if you thought it was just that you were a sad male adolescent with a modem where your life ought to be.) Perhaps you've even experienced one of the Three Signs you're living in a bad movie: (i) you wake up from dreams by sitting up and panting; (ii) no matter how fast your system, text always appears on your monitor *one letter at a time*; (iii) someone says a line about not being in Kansas any more. If any of this sounds like you, you've probably sat in a cinema seat and heard a voice hacking into your head: *What is the point?*

Unfortunately, nobody can be told what the point is; you have to experience it for yourself. Yes, yes, I admit that Larry F said something similar about the *Matrix* and then proceeded to spend the next half-hour doing almost nothing but tell Keanu at flagellating length what the *Matrix* is. But you get a choice. If you take the blue pill, you can go back to a world in which *The Matrix* is nothing more threatening than a harmless, charmless PKD-with-explosions movie, the latest and least in a seemingly-interminable series of unacknowledged retreads of *Time Out of Joint*. You'll grudgingly agree that it does push forward the technical boundaries of the action movie with its live-action emulation of *anime* techniques, and that for better or worse this film will go down as the one that gave the world the VR stunt – in which the already heightened and stylized action of Hong Kong combat cinema is subjected to further digital enhancement unfettered by the laws of physics. You may concede that Keanu is for once quite well wrangled, and gets to say "Woah"

in that way that he has made so uniquely his own; that it has many striking images, even if they're generally more effective and evocative in the trailer than in the actual film; and that the narrative structure is sufficiently unconventional to keep the viewer pleasantly off balance. But you'll still have to admit that the plot is a shambles, and the absence of a proper ending a major problem, fobbing us off with a vague monologue when what we're expecting is a final transcendent set piece. And it'll be hard to find kind things to say about the dialogue, cloth-eared and humourless to an extent rarely found outside comics bubbles ("Fate, it seems, is not without a sense of irony"), and at its worst barely literate ("After he died, the Oracle prophesized his return." – "Uh, don't you mean prophesied?" – "Listen up, Dogstar boy, just because you can do three-letter anagrams doesn't mean you're *funkandwagnalls.com*").

But there are moments in *The Matrix* where the layer of skin on the



Silver/Wachowski Bros. team's delusions of significance, coupled with their apparent inexperience of any human narrative outside movies, comics and games. But don't tell me there haven't been times when you've suspected that the war against the machines has already been fought and lost: that the world's global story-telling media have been taken over by a non-human pseudo-intelligence that holds the masses in subjection to a vast collective hallucination, sustained by huge faceless machines in suits who farm human consumers for sustenance in their sprawling nightmare city of desert and smog. They feed you recycled dreams to keep you docile, all the while they tap your vital forces to slake their needs – hang on, I'll try that again in a deeper voice.



skeleton gets suspiciously thin: where what the Hollywood manuals coyly call the "mythic template" pokes dismally through in ponderous capitalized discussion of The One (= the star), Destiny (= the plot), the Oracle (= the script), and so on. Those still enslaved by the dream will simply put this down to the Joel

You'll recall that one of the first signs reality has been tampered with is *déjà vu*: the feeling that you've seen this whole film before and it wasn't much good the first time. If *The Matrix* is a movie that looks like a comic, Chuck Pfarrer's adaptation of his Dark Horse *Virus* saga is a comic adaptation that looks spookily like a whole clutch of movies. Most particularly, it looks a lot like last year's superior and even sillier *Deep Rising* – though here the tropical *Mary Celeste* is infested not by deep-ocean CG cryptozoa but by animatronic robots created by intelligent electricity from outer space, which gives a fairly accurate index of the level of both science and plotting. One of those films where the bone structure of the genre shows fetchingly through the skin, it includes lines like "Listen, I think we should split up into two groups" and "It looks like some kind of ejector seat" (conveniently sited here in this *missile room* packed with *humongous amounts of explosive* – by the by, anyone got any ideas for where to situate the ending?). A peak on the



The Matrix – above: Laurence Fishburne Facing page: Carrie-Anne Moss, Keanu Reeves, and Laurence Fishburne

graph of shamelessness is where Joanne Pacula and Jamie Lee Curtis find matching skin-tight red body outfits ("Survival suits! Quick, put one on!"). But really it's all recovered meat: the expendability roster; the finale bomb with the digital timer display; the feeble false-ending surprise; and yes, the indestructible killer alien who turns out to be fatally vulnerable to fire, frost, or (as here) water, making the choice of a deep-water Pacific research vessel a particularly ill-judged beachhead for invasion earth. Ask yourself: mildly diverting though it is, is this the kind of entertainment that would be dreamed up by an intelligent human?

**B**ut if you still doubt your suspicions, consider *My Favourite Martian*: a start-to-finish machine movie generated by the Disney strain of the 60s-remake algorithm most recently recognizable from *Flubber*. The calculation here seems to be that adults who remember the TV series (1963-66) will now have children of precisely the age to be amused by the relentlessly unappealing toilet humour and slapstick. UK viewers from the regions may find all this pretty baffling, since many will have no recollection of any show called *My Favourite Martian* ever being broadcast, and may well put it down as further proof that the 1960s themselves are a collective false memory foisted on us by our unseen masters for sinis-

ter purposes of their own.

One of the things that makes the resurrection of Uncle Martin more challenging than most such exercises is that Mars has been dead for 20 years. To its credit, *My Favourite Martian* deals with the problem in the only decent way, by dismissing it speedily in the prologue with a ridiculous gag (those pulp-cover art deco Martian cities have been there all along, just past the next rock). But it does mean that the whole film becomes a complex essay in nostalgia for a period sf vision that died with the times of which it was a part: an age when the cosmos was full of people just like us but with retractable antennae, and TV sitcoms dressed up innocently camp subtexts about secret lives in socially compliant relationships of avuncularity. To haul this into the postmodern world, the original scenario is simultaneously remade and sequelled. "It's just like the incident of sixty-four!" exclaims one of the ill-disguised MiBs who in this movie drive around (the one good joke) in black saloons unmarked but for an enormous SETI logo on the side; and when the shades come off the mystery man at the end, it transpires that Jeff Daniels and Christopher Lloyd have merely been recapitulating an archetypal narrative that renews itself in each generation as the audience reaches the peak of its reproductive cycle.

Otherwise, though, all the usual transformations have been glumly

applied. The original TV-budget effects (two knitting needles in Ray Walston's hair) have been replaced by costly CG morphs and alien designs for which the term "state of the art" seems all too sadly appropriate. There's a putatively-cute polymorph buddy who self-sacrifices (hurrah) and is resurrected (bah). The casting is mostly computerized, with everyone well below par and nobody looking like they want to be here (and yes, the "not in Kansas" line is in there uncut). The one element that does carry an uncannily authentic 1960s charge – dispiritingly, in a script credited to two women – is the treatment of the female characters, serving out their thankless role as playful objects of buttock-spanking and Martian frenching, which needless to say is all they need to jellify knees and unfocus eyes in a rapture of take-me-I'm-yours. True, Daryl Hannah (remember her?) does finally get to morph into an alien killing machine and eat a thick-necked machismo for brunch; but she can't wait to spit out the xenomorph gum and revert to the kind of simpering beach-blonde who will always be more than a match for pushy career-gel love rivals with posh alien accents. So you have to ask yourself: are you ready to wake up from all this? Have you ever wondered what the real world looks like? Can you handle the *truth*? Here, eat this disk.

**Nick Lowe**

# Mutant Popcorn

## carton two

**I**t won't have escaped notice that the graves are opening. In this season of conspicuous reincarnations, film history is yielding up its dead to a joyous mass resurrection, as millennial technology powers a rapture of new looks for old genres and newly affordable workarounds for ancient forms of spectacle. Since CG moviemaking is still stronger at backgrounds and other bluescreen stuff than creature and character rendering, one of the most welcome short-term side-effects of the digital-FX revolution has been a renaissance of set – and with it, of the classical Hollywood epic genres that priced themselves out of existence when big sets and casts of thousands became unaffordable. Standard narratives date the great extinction to the last and most iconic Egyptian spectacle movie made the old-fashioned way, Mankiewicz's 1963 *Cleopatra*; so it's no surprise that the rebirth of the ancient-world spectacular (with Ridley Scott's *Gladiators* next out of the gate) has been led by pyramid movies, first with Katzenberg's new-animation *Prince of Egypt*, and now with Stephen Sommers' exhilaratingly dimwitted live-action *The Mummy*.

Now, few who saw former kidflick writer/director Sommers' first mainstream movie – the sublimely bonkers Canadian disaster-movie-with-Krakens *Deep Rising* – can have suspected they were looking at, if not the next James Cameron, at least the next Emmerich/Devlin. But on the evidence, the man is in direct line of succession to the throne of upper and lower action movies. (Press-time rumours now have him heading the shortlist for *Jurassic Park 3*.) Like the *ID4* boys, Sommers has no discernible shame and a ruthless grasp of genre, formula, and pacing, understanding the fast-evolving grammar of contemporary action film-making in a way that only a handful of his peers consistently do. Certainly nobody could accuse this *Mummy* incarnation of being underfull, with its arsenal of plug-in fun modules including vampiric regeneration, CG sand magic, a disappearing lost desert city, biblical plague-spraying, and the obligatory Godzilloid finale where the creature hatches a whole army of similar monstrosities.

A lot of Sommers' work here has presumably been done for him, since the *Mummy* remake project had been knocking around for a good decade before Sommers came on the scene, and the high-concept plenitude of his

story suggests he's been allowed to grave-rob all the best ideas from the remains of earlier scripts, as well as from both the Universal and Hammer franchises, which have clearly been pored over at length. The final version is a complex, highly stratified deposit, with a lot of remains of earlier structures reincorporated into the rubble. Some ancient vestiges of the 1931 original still remain, their purpose long since forgotten: Evelyn is still Egyptian on her own mummy's side, but without the reincarnation plot that gave this a point; Karloff's character Ardeth Bey is still around, but bizarrely reborn here as a dashing desert cavalier-priest and George Harrison lookalike quite unrelated to the resurrected Imhotep.

All the same, Sommers' handmarks are all over the finished product – even down to director's pet Kevin J. O'Connor reprising his whining *Deep Rising* character, the one misfire in the otherwise shrewd casting. Like its predecessor, *The Mummy* cannily sticks an overqualified actor in a timber-faced hero role and gives the best material to its heroine. Brendan Fraser's "Rick" (ooh, the hubris of it; you can just see him running a bar in Morocco 20 years later) models some great shirts, but mostly has to apply his skill to doing lines like "We are in very serious trouble" more deeply and slowly than has ever been attempted in acting history. In contrast, while the best wig in the world and all the frilly nightwear in the empire won't help Rachel Weisz's stunt librarian compete with DR's Famke Janssen for glamour, what she can do is upscreen everyone else by sheer relentless quantity of mugging and dauntless professional determination to wring every last available dribble of playability from her challengingly thankless lines. It's a wise investment, since much of Sommers's dialogue is so unspeakable as to sound like a fanboy homage to Ed Wood: "So it has begun – the beginning of the end!"; "Death will come on swift wings to whomsoever opens this chest!" (presumably some kind of hieratic accusative-of-plotting).

Needless to say, though it gallops with abandon from each set piece to the next ("First one to the next scene gets \$500!"), this is a *Mummy* whose brain, heart, and vital organs have been carefully excised and buried in separate Canopic jars in the trackless sands. The 1931 original is nowadays read as a film of some maturity about colonial tensions, national identity, and ownership of the past, offering an unusually thoughtful view of archaeology as a process enmeshed in ethical and political concerns. Among much else, it gave a remarkably

nuanced picture of the political framework of Egyptian excavation in the 1920s – the tricky funding of field seasons, the uneasy balancing of competing national and institutional interests, the delicate contractual complexities over ownership of finds. Pointedly eschewing the kind of crude racial antitheses to which Sommers's *Mummy* has so readily succumbed, it played Imhotep's quest for his lost beloved with remarkable delicacy and sympathy, counterpoising the colonial powers' curitorly interests with Karloff's historical claim on the antique past as something still yearningly alive.

And the millennial *Mummy* has no patience with any of that. As in *Deep Rising*, Sommers's heroes are opportunistic burglars on a caper movie gone spectacularly pear-shaped. Though the look and style are meant to evoke Spielberg's trilogy, Sommers's model of archaeology in action is a very different Raider. Indiana Jones was at least a trained and tenured academic, however maverick once he got into the field. But Sommers' characters are mere privateering Lara Crofts, treating the past much as Hollywood has always treated history and its riches: as grab & run treasure trove for whoever can get past the booby-traps. We shouldn't underestimate how much damage is done by this casual heroization of the freebooting trade in illegal antiquities – a major international racket which has exploded out of all control in recent years. It's no doubt one reason why the Sommers version is so careful not to intend any reference to actual characters or institutions, living or dead. The British Museum has been replaced by a cryptic organization called the "Bembridge Scholars," apparently modelled on the subscription-funded Egypt Exploration Society; but the real Egyptological expertise is provided by Weisz's romantic amateur, anxious to prove her credentials *against* the academic establishment. This is archaeology as global market commodity – where history is something you dig up for profit from third-world deposits, exploit till the resources run out, and abandon as it sinks back into the sand, obligingly cleaning up after itself to leave no loose ends behind. So convenient, so trouble-free; and there's plenty more for the enterprising conglomerate to mine.

**B**ack in Sommers's own cradleland of no-budget-no-problem talent north of the 49th, *Last Night* tries for a grown-up take on the classic summer-blockbuster millennial themes. A kind of *Short Cuts* set in the last six hours before apocalypse,

Don McKellar's film has a motley posse of Toronto professionals cross one another's lives in a narrative of piquant recombinations converging on a single inexorable ending. The structure is built from neat, touching moments of convergence, as pieces of the web of pre-existing relationships between the characters click one by one into place, and their small stories collectively affirm the wry dignity of human relations at the moment of their universal extinction.

For good and ill, it's a *very Canadian* movie, making use of Toronto's by now iconic status as generic North American city, which has transcended its early convenience as a cheap stand-in shooting location to figure as the mythicized western urban landscape it played most memorably in *Crash*. Nevertheless, *Last Night* is emphatically set in the real Toronto, with names of suburbs bandied with a casualness calculated to baffle any but natives. Laudable though this is, the central plot conceit, while a neat way to address a wide-canvas theme while economizing on talent, only compounds the impression that there are only a dozen different people in town. Pretty much all the faces are familiar from Cronenberg, Egoyan, or usually both, with a particular concentration of refugees from *eXistenZ* (including McKellar, the ubiquitous Sarah Polley, and Cronenberg himself), and even Genevieve Bujold popping up in her obligatory cameo as International Canadian Name to Secure State Funding. In fact, the whole thing reads all too easily as a distinctly Canadian take on armageddon. There are riots and looting, of course, but (though doubtless for budgetary reasons) they happen largely offscreen from the quiet, civilized apartment lives of the middle-class principals. "Now more than ever we should be courteous and respect each other's needs," says McKellar's dad, as the family gathers for a last Christmas dinner; and one of the strands of the plot centres on the maintenance of public services right to the end.

And this does make it hard for *Last Night* to be as mature a film as it would like. The major difference from *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon* is the insistence on global apocalypse as an ineluctable fact of narrative, something sustained only by the unavoidable but annoying device of leaving the nature of the end obtrusively unspecified, apart from the non-clue that night no longer falls. But there's something exasperatingly bourgeois about this fatalistic insistence on the end of the world as a human rather than a technical issue, limiting the thought-experiment to private human

reactions rather than collective solution-seeking. In the end the question you're left with is less "Hmm, what would I spend the last six hours doing?" than "How on earth would you account for an apocalypse that (i) stopped the earth rotating for some time beforehand but nevertheless (ii) arrived suddenly and predictably all over the world (iii) at exactly midnight?" and "Well, I daresay it might be like that in the official quality-of-life capital of the planet, but what's going on in Cape Town?" It sounds perverse to claim that the gung-ho Hollywood optimism of last summer's popcorn apocalypses is in some ways more grown-up than this humane,



*The Mummy* – Arnold Vosloo mouthing off

well-meant, and mostly pleasing attempt to think through unthinkable things. But it might have been a more mature film for contemplating the end in a way that widened the imaginative horizons away from the narrow, narcissistic preoccupations of the kind of people who go to little Canadian movies.

**T**he painful condition of cinematic puberty is both the subject and the effect of *Virtual Sexuality*, an odd, misbegotten, but not uninteresting little Britflit with no discernible audience. The aim seems to have been to breed a homegrown strain of teen fantasy comedy, starting with the proven material of one of Chloe Rayban's frothy young-adult novels (which wore the even clunkier title *Virtual Sexual Reality*). But YA fiction isn't an easy genre to film, with its relatively young and narrow audience catchment, and the result is something uneasily stranded between Children's Film Foundation, a circa-1984 Molly Ringwald vehicle, and

*Porky's Notting Hill Vacation*. The novel's central characters and setup are fairly faithfully preserved: teen heroine's virtual makeover as a hunky bloke comes ill-explainedly to life, giving her/him the chance to view life and friends from the lads' perspective, and to learn some gentle life lessons about sexual difference while s/he tries to get her old gender back. But it's all very mild stuff, more Tango than Hooch, so the film has fatally tried to broaden the appeal by bumping the heroine's age from 15 to 17, and rebuilding the novel's largely plotless plot around a crude, coarse and queasy obsession with losing her virginity.

The mind-squirming dreadfulness of this is actually, in its unintended way, a more authentic and effective evocation of teenage experience than anything in the unthreateningly-celibate novel, as we watch the characters fumble embarrassingly with adult feelings and themes they have no idea how to handle. The hit-and-miss cast do their best with their weakly-written roles, but since none of the players look younger than their mid-20s, and some look considerably older, their studied mimicry of teen mannerisms it's all a bit like *Blue Remembered Hills: The Revenge*. On the plus side, Rupert Penry-Jones is quite engaging as the girlie trapped in a hunk's body, if you can shut out his unfortunate resemblance to the young Rik Mayall – though anyone who needs this much reassurance about queering it would do better checking out other nightspots than the local Warner Village. It's at its sporadic best when closest to the book's project of jokily comparing male and female vantages on YA life – one of the other Raybans is a back-to-back novelty telling the same story from the boy's and girl's perspectives – and it's able to present its hero/ine's ambivalent sexual identity much more empathetically than would have been thinkable in a Hollywood film, with a more mature ending than its *Clueless* aspirations lead one to fear.

But while it's pacey enough, the plotting is amateurish, characterizations grotesquely coarsened from the novel's, and the musical numbers by a gallery of the world's most unsignable bands are a front runner for the worst soundtrack album of all time. As with so many British films, it's nice that they tried, but hard to imagine who'd ever want to watch it when they could have something that doesn't embarrass you with notions of growing up at all. It's tough, but like poor old Imhotep, if you can't compete in the new global sandpit, you're history.

**Nick Lowe**

Another conflicting origin story for a barbarian critic Thog the Mighty! In *Imaginary Worlds* (1973), Lin Carter deplored Robert E. Howard's inept coining of names... "Thak, Thaug, **Thog**, Yog, Yara, Yogah, Zang, Zogar, Sag." A line which deserves to be set to music.

## THE SECRET GALACTICS

**Douglas Adams** was grilled by Jeremy Paxman on Radio 4's *Start the Week*. In tones of loathing: "You're not a science fiction writer, are you?" No, no, said Adams hastily. Blowing up Earth in *Hitch-Hiker* wasn't horrible old sf but Pythonesque excess, and writing all those strangely sf-like sequels was forced upon him by, presumably, artistically integritous need for the money.

**Chris Boyce** (1943-1999) died most unexpectedly on 29 June after falling ill at work in Glasgow. He was 55. Best known for the prize-winning *Catchworld* (1975) — a pioneering novel about brain-computer interfaces leading to transcendence — he also wrote thrillers, reviewed sf, and was a cheerful, exuberant and popular figure in Scots fandom.

**John Glashan** (1927-1999), noted cartoonist, died on 15 June. He often flirted with sf themes, as in the quirky "Genius" sequence that ran in the *Observer* magazine from 1978 and starred inventor Anode Enzyme, IQ 12,794. ("At present I'm working on an international language based on numbers — I got the idea in a Chinese restaurant...")

**John Grant** is busy "writing my scholarly essay for Gary Westfahl, who's guest-editing the millennial edition of *Extrapolation* and has foolishly commissioned me to rant for a couple of thousand words, complete with Panglossish footnotes like wot academics dig, on the evils of Generic Fantasy — including not just the written word but works by Simon R. Green."

**DeForest Kelly** (1920-1999), the actor best known as Dr McCoy in *Star Trek*, died on 11 June after long illness. He was 79.

**Stephen King** was hit by an out-of-control car while out walking on 19 June, and spent several hours undergoing surgery for "orthopedic kinds of injuries," chiefly a broken leg. The motorist who swerved on to the shoulder and hit King lost control thanks to the antics of a loose dog inside the car. No *Cujo* jokes, please.

**Sam Moskowitz**'s sf collection was auctioned by Sotheby's in New York. A Frank R. Paul painting went for a record \$67,500; the most "important" lot, at \$23,000, was a huge archive of letters and MSS by and relating to William Hope Hodgson.

## ANSIBLE LINK



## DAVID LANGFORD

**Kim Newman** joined the Clarke Awards jury: "I took the precaution of confirming with Paul Kincaid that there was, indeed, a 'no award' option."

**David Pringle** continues to be sighted in literature: "Anerley became conscious suddenly that there was a pricking about his skin and an overpowering smell of burned hair under his nostrils." ("The Three Correspondents," Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.)

**Mario Puzo** of *Godfather* fame, who scripted the Christopher Reeve *Superman* movie, slept with the fishes on 2 July. He was 78.

**Robert Rankin** creatively quotes: "Heinlein said, famously, that ninety-five per cent of all science fiction was rubbish, adding that ninety-five per cent of *everything* was rubbish." (*Snuff Fiction*, 1999)... Sturgeon, not Heinlein.

**Ray Russell** (1924-1999), long-time sf/horror author and *Playboy* editor (1954-75), died in March aged 74. He received 1991 World Fantasy and 1993 Bram Stoker awards for life achievement.

**Jim Turner** (1945-1999), editor/publisher at Arkham House (1976-96) and then his own imprint Golden Gryphon Books, died from cancer in March; he was 54. Michael Swanwick adds: "Once, when I published a story that Jim didn't think very much of, he called me up to determine whether I knew what a piece of crap it was or else had lost the ability to write altogether. The good opinion of a man like that was worth having."

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Servants of the Wankh.** Mattel Inc is nervously making changes to the packaging of its Tarzan action figure since — oh dearie me — "the spring-loaded arm can be pumped rapidly up and down from Tarzan's chest to below his loin

cloth, a motion that some people call suggestive." Mattel's response is to secure this lustful limb so it can't grope below waist level while a still-boxed Tarzan is being tried out in a shop. Rampant suggestiveness remains OK in the privacy of the home.

**Grim News.** Old-time Liverpool sf fan and rare book dealer John Roles died in late June, apparently strangled by an intruder who then set his house-cum-shop on fire; within days, a man with a history of arson was charged with murder. Roles was the first (1951) chairman of the original Liverpool sf group, and edited several fanzines. The local *Daily Post* published a tribute to his friend Ramsey Campbell.

**Bram Stoker Awards** (horror) winners ... Novel: Stephen King, *Bag of Bones*. First Novel: Michael Marano, *Dawn Song*. Long Fiction:: Peter Straub, "Mr Clubb and Mr Cuff." Short: Bruce Holland Rogers, "The Dead Boy at Your Window." Collection:: John Shirley, *Black Butterflies*: *A Flock on the Dark Side*. Anthology: *Horrors! 365 Scary Stories*, ed Stefan Dziemianowicz, Martin H. Greenberg & Robert Weinberg. Non-Fiction: *DarkEcho*, the first Stoker win for a wholly on-line publication. For Young Readers: Nancy Etchemendy, "Bigger Than Death." Screenplay: (tie) Bill Condon, *Gods and Monsters*; Alex Proyas, *Dark City*.

**Watch That Sequitur!** I enjoyed the Peterborough sf group newsletter's mention of that area's Gothic fans "marking the fiftieth anniversary of the execution of local-born vampire John Haigh. Convicted of six murders, though he confessed to nine, his parents were Plymouth Brethren, as were Aleister Crowley's."

**Spectrum Awards** are for sf/fantasy/horror that's positive about gay matters. Novel shortlist: Anne Harris, *Accidental Creatures*; Stephen Leigh, *Dark Water's Embrace*; Carolyn Ives Gilman, *Halfway Human*; Nancy Kress, *Maximum Light*; Fiona Patton, *The Painter Knight*.

**Thog's Masterclass.** Vienna, in that perfunctory way of hers, has sighed and spread her legs to be shagged by the winter solstice." (Adrian Mathews, *Vienna Blood*, 1999)... *Dept of It Grows On You*: "She was the kind who grew up with suitors, had powerful men with roses on their knees before her..." (Fay Weldon, "Inside the Whale," 1999)... "Crane had slid into the ranks of Washington's elite — well, the semi-elite, the under-elite — like a gilded suppository." (Robert Charles Wilson, *Darwinia*, 1998)... "Excitement leaped like a trout in the public trousers." (Thomas Harris, *Hannibal*, 1999)

# Molly and the Men in Black

*Francis Amery*

When the silver light first came creeping through Molly's window at half past midnight she naturally assumed that it was a sign from heaven, to reassure her that the angel had got home. When the duvet slid away and she rose into the air, levitated three feet above the dirty sheet, she took it for a miracle. Even when she floated out of the window, which had opened of its own accord in spite of the fact that the sash was nailed shut, she wasn't in the least anxious. Not that she'd expected any kind of recompense for helping the angel out, of course; she'd had far too much experience of life to expect that virtue would ever be rewarded, even in heaven.

When she saw the slowly-rotating saucer-shaped UFO hovering above the B&B, however, she realized that heaven had nothing to do with it. It was just another bloody abduction. Francine from the ground floor had told her only the week before that she was overdue for an inspection. At the time, Molly had assumed that Francine was just pissed because Molly had confessed to boredom after hearing Francine tell her own abduction story for the 15th time, but now that she was actually being sucked up into the belly of the saucer she had to concede that maybe Francine had been entitled to get excited.

*Oh well, she thought, as the aperture closed soundlessly behind her, I might not have had as much recent practice as Francine, but once you've been on the game you never lose the knack. There's nothing so very terrible about a rectal probe.*

She was just trying to put a brave face on it; Molly hadn't forgotten that the B&B's first abductee had been little anorectic Annie, who'd been carted off to the hospital not long after, when her HIV went full-blown. Annie had been dead within a month, having already shed

most of her flesh and all of her resistance. Opinions varied as to whether the UFO or the world was to blame; Molly had come down on the side of the world.

The advantage Molly had over Annie and Francine was that she'd had the chance to hear both their stories. The salient details had been traced and retraced so often that she knew exactly what the score was. When the little silver guys with the big almond eyes came to peer down at her she just smiled and said "Hi," and when the cold probe went up her arse she didn't bat an eyelid. She didn't gag when they slipped the wriggly things into her more accommodating orifices and she didn't writhe when they attached the electrodes to her scalp. If she hadn't been incapable of speech by that time she might even have apologized for the fact that her brain had been comprehensively fried by all the LSD and E's she'd done while she was heavily into the rave scene, but she knew they'd probably figure it out by themselves. If they didn't like it, maybe they ought to try fishing in better neighbourhoods.

The only real surprise was that the aliens injected the biochip into her left breast instead of the nape of the neck, where Annie and Francine had got theirs. That was bound to cause embarrassment, if anybody demanded that she show them the sore spot. If Francine could be trusted, somebody would – but Molly knew that she'd have the option of playing dumb. For some reason she'd never quite been able to fathom, men always believed her when she played dumb.

Forewarned being forearmed, Molly knew that she only had to wait until the examination was concluded, and that she'd be returned to her bed safe and sound. According to Francine, who'd spent hours on the abductee helpline, only one subject in five got recalled for a more extensive examination, and that was usually six or eight

months afterwards. The silvery guys obviously had a heavy schedule – as you'd expect, if they were really trying to catalogue the whole human race before reporting back to Epsilon Eridani IV or Tau Ceti II, or wherever.

Molly estimated that the whole thing took about an hour, although she knew that her time-sense might have been cunningly distorted. The aliens could do that, according to the abductee helpline. After doing her research, Francine had assured Molly that the aliens were easily capable of ensuring that people would forget the whole experience, or remember it only fleetingly, as a dream, but that they'd stopped bothering since hypnotists had found a sure way to penetrate their deceptions.

"The reason I can remember it so clearly," Francine had assured Molly a dozen times over, as well as everyone else who'd listen, "is that I'm an abnormally sensitive person. If I'd been able to get my regular fix I'd have breezed through the whole thing, but it's been slow out on the street since the local trainspotters started taking plate-numbers."

Molly had never thought of herself as an abnormally sensitive person, so she half-expected to have forgotten the entire business by the time she woke up again, but she must have underestimated herself, because she remembered every last detail.

Unlike Annie and Francine, of course, Molly would never have breathed a word to a living soul voluntarily. Nobody who'd had a thing with Elvis – even an unconsummated thing – was likely to underestimate the value of discretion. Unfortunately, she wasn't given that opportunity. Molly hardly had time to get her knickers on before the men in black came knocking at the door – and she knew right there and then that her life was never going to be the same again.

It was Francine who'd ratted her out, of course. Francine was the only one in the B&B who kept her eyes resolutely fixed on the sky when she couldn't rouse up any business, and the only one who had the phone number of Croydon's equivalent of Area 51. Francine was also the only one whose door didn't open, even by a crack, when the men in black started banging on Molly's door, proclaiming loudly that they were from the DSS Investigations Department. They obviously hadn't the faintest idea how to go about building a viable cover; everybody in the B&B knew the faces and inside leg measurements of the local DSS's ball-bearing secret agents, and everybody knew that civil servants couldn't arrest anybody who refused to be arrested unless they had a warrant.

It wouldn't have been so bad if the men in black had looked like Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones, but these were *British* men in black, and they had a very British idea of who the real scum of the universe were. They had probably been to public school, although that didn't excuse the moustaches and the pin-striped ties. The senior man's moustache was a pencil-thin thing that would have suggested queerness if he hadn't been so obviously interested by the sight of the bare flesh above and below Molly's knickers; his junior had a bushier one whose lop-sidedness suggested that he hadn't quite mastered the art and science of Bic topiary.

From the moment the senior man bundled her into the back of the black Rover 2000, copping a feel of her bum in the process, Molly was absolutely determined not to cooperate. She knew that it would be useless to deny everything, and risky to be economical with the truth, but it was a matter of principle. If they used truth serum there was a risk they'd find out about Elvis and the secret experiments, but she figured that they probably knew about that anyway. They wouldn't be interested in the angel.

Once they were under way, driving south at a very respectable speed – all the commuter traffic was heading the other way – the man with the pencil moustache said: "I'm afraid that I had to lie to you back there. I'm not from the DSS, and you've no need to worry about your benefits."

"You don't say," Molly retorted. "Wow, you really had me fooled. I'm so stupid. Francine only told me about your last visit 17 times, and even from here I can tell that she was entirely mistaken about the pin-sized prick. Her sense of proportion goes right out the window when she's full of dope – so to speak."

"I can understand your being annoyed," the man in black admitted, his voice becoming even more treacly although he must have figured out that he was being subtly insulted, "but this is a matter of national security. More than that – the future of the entire human race might be at stake."

Thanks to her brief encounter with the angel, Molly knew that even the virtuous members of the human race didn't actually have a future *as such*, on account of there being no time in heaven, but she wasn't about to tell that to the man with the pencil moustache. Her first priority, she figured, was to avoid the possibility that they'd do an amateur mastectomy in order to recover the biochip. Her tits might not be her best feature, but she didn't like the idea of not having a matching pair.

"Well," Molly said defensively, "I expect you've heard it all before. Haven't we all? Unfortunately, it's all a bit vague. Big round thing with lights around the rim, slowly rotating. Beam of light comes down, then I'm floating up into the belly of it – rather like being born, only backwards. Little guys with big eyes staring at me all the time. The memory's fading already, to tell you the truth. If you hadn't come for me, I'd probably have thought that it was all a dream, courtesy of a dodgy kebab and Francine's fairy tales."

"It was no dream, Molly," the man with the pin-striped tie assured her, "and Francine's story was no fairy tale. We've known about the aliens since Woking in 1897, although the bloody Americans wouldn't take a blind bit of notice for 50 years, until they got a crasher of their own. They even accused us of faking the autopsy record, just because we hadn't got it on film. Who were we supposed to get in – Georges Méliès?"

"Is that how it's pronounced?" Molly said, trying to sound irredeemably dopey. "Well, I wish I could help, but it's all *very* hazy. They probably drugged me. I'm really not sure how much of it really happened and how much was just suggestion, from hearing Francine's story over and over and over and..."

"I understand," said the man in black hurriedly. "It's not uncommon for abductees to be disorientated. We can

put you under hypnosis, if that will help."

"They tried that last time I was in the Maudsley for treatment," Molly told him, blandly. "The hypnotist was very nice. He specialized in breast enlargements, I think, when he wasn't doing his bit in the bin. I was a terrible subject. He said that I was constitutionally unable to relax because of what speed and ecstasy had done to my nerve-ends. I'm sorry, but I really don't think I'll be any use to you."

"Are you a regular drug-user?" the man in black inquired, in the slightly defeated manner of a dedicated seeker after truth confronted with the witness from hell.

"I had to give it up a couple of years ago," Molly admitted. "The doc told me that if I carried on, I wouldn't have enough self-control left to keep from wetting the bed at night. I'm straight now, apart from the Prozac and the tranks – but I'd rather you didn't tell anyone about the tranks. I buy them over the counter at Boots, pretending they're for an allergy. Not that I'm not allergic, you understand – it's just that the allergy's not the real reason I buy the tabs. Did you know that all the best antihistamines are also major tranks, on account of being chlorpromazine derivatives?"

"No," said the secret agent, glumly. "I didn't."

"I'm afraid I won't be *nearly* as much use to you as Francine was," Molly said with a sigh. "She's so much younger than I am, and she gets out so much more. Isn't it a pity the aliens never abduct intelligent people like you?"

That was a step too far. Molly knew from bitter experience that even civil servants could spot a wind up eventually, and that they never liked having the piss taken out of them, presumably because they were too tight-arsed to have any to spare.

"Don't mess us about, Molly," her interrogator growled, still, using her first name because he wanted her to think that they knew *everything* about her, although all they really knew was where she lived. "This is serious. The greys have been watching us for more than a hundred years, and we have reason to believe that they're about to move to the next phase of their plan."

"They seemed more silver than grey, actually," Molly observed.

"Only when the light's bright," he countered. "We suspect that they're worried. We think they've been expecting us to wipe ourselves out for the last 50 years, but now that the collapse of communism has reduced the probability of nuclear war to one in a million they might be considering direct action. We think they might be preparing to use what they've learned about human physiology to engineer a doomsday bug. That's probably why they've stepped up the anatomy lessons lately. We think AIDS might have been a trial run, maybe even a failed attempt."

The Rover turned into an underground car park beneath what looked for all the world like any other Croydon office-block. You had to give *some* credit to British Military Intelligence, Molly reflected. The stupid yanks had built a huge fenced compound in the middle of the Arizona desert, where it was bound to stick out like a sore thumb from any viewpoint in orbit, but anyone looking at *this* place from any angle whatsoever wouldn't be able to distinguish it from your bog-stan-

dard insurance company. If only the spies inside could keep a little more closely in touch with the manners and mores of real DSS personnel, the set-up would be perfect.

Unfortunately, the room they took her to wasn't nearly as cosy or as user-friendly as an actuary's office. It might have been mistaken for a hospital operating theatre, except for the disquieting fact that the straps they used to secure her to the table after they'd stripped her were thicker and tighter than the ones in Torquemadam's Berwick Street Boudoir.

They had enough sensitivity to bring in female officers to search her teeth for new cavities and her cavities for new teeth, but that didn't make Molly feel any better about the ordeal. They put lead-lensed spectacles over her eyes while they X-rayed her head, but they didn't take any noticeable precautions lower down. They vamped a whole half-pint of blood and various other fluid samples, but so far as she could tell they didn't find the biochip. One of the female officers was kind enough to replace the filling that she had accidentally knocked out of one of her molars, carefully and without any fuss, but the rest of the procedure seemed distinctly lacking in respect for her person. When they were finished, they put a thin sheet over her, but she still felt awkwardly naked underneath it.

When the two men with moustaches continued with the interrogation they read the questions from a series of forms, running through them at the double with quasi-military precision. There was nothing on the list about Elvis or angels, and if they had sneaked any truth serum into her veins it was obviously from a dud batch. She shaped her answers to give the impression that she was an unobservant, unintelligent and thoroughly confused person, but couldn't help feeling just a little annoyed by the ease with which the ruse succeeded.

"You didn't have to keep me strapped down once you'd taken the X-rays," Molly complained, when they finally set her wrists and ankles free and allowed her to gather the sheet around herself. "I could have answered the questions perfectly well while I was massaging my pins and needles."

"It's just routine," the man with the pencil moustache assured her. Like Molly he was putting on an act, but unlike Molly he wasn't succeeding. He was too transparent to persuade anyone with half a brain that he wasn't the kind of person to be stimulated by the process of strapping a woman down and tormenting her.

"We're truly sorry for the inconvenience, Molly," the agent went on, heaping lie upon lie, "but we need to figure out exactly what the greys did to you if we're to have any chance of finding out why. We're all in quarantine here until we're sure that you're not carrying any unknown viruses or prions. The important thing now is to think ahead. I suppose you know that they sometimes come back for a second look."

"Their procedures aren't exactly secret any more," Molly observed.

"On the contrary," the man in black replied. "The best place to hide a tree is in a forest, and the best place to hide the truth is in a mass of confused data. We think they let people like your friend Francine remember more precisely

because they're irredeemable gossips and congenital liars. They favour trailer trash in the States for exactly the same reason. But we're just as clever as they are, because we know they make the occasional mistake and we know that whenever they lift somebody with a little bit more common sense, that gives us an opportunity. The question is, Molly, are you one of those people? Are you the kind of person who could help us – not just by tipping us off next time you catch a glimpse of them at work, but by keeping your wits about you if they come back? Can you probe them while they're probing you?" He didn't sound hopeful. He might as well have been reading off his crib-sheet.

Well, Molly thought, *I'm not doing such a bad job of probing you while you're probing me.* All she said aloud was: "I could try." She tried to sound woefully unconvincing, and she could tell that he took the bait – but there was still a gleam in his eye. Molly knew better than to be flattered by that. It wasn't her faded beauty that had turned him on.

"Okay, Molly," he said, brimming over with false generosity. "Consider yourself recruited. If they come back – and I say *if* because the odds are they won't, so you shouldn't worry too much – it would be a really good idea if you were to make a proper study of your surroundings. Forget the big staring eyes and try to concentrate on the walls and the equipment. Try to memorize any symbols you see. It'll be hard, because they don't write in any script you'll ever have seen, but if you can make accurate drawings of any symbols you see that'll be a great help. If they say anything to you – they probably won't, even if they do come back, but *if* they do – we'd really appreciate it if you could remember *exactly* what they say, even if it isn't in English. And if they put anything inside you, try to remember *exactly* where they put it. That's very important – it's nothing to worry about, but we do need to know."

"That's not going to be easy," Molly said, trying to imply that for someone like her all that remembering would be absolutely bloody impossible – although she was still offended by the ease with which he seemed to take the inference.

"You'll have to stay here for a while, until we get the report on the blood tests," he said. "Then I'll get someone to drop you at the station. We'll even buy you a travelcard, to thank you for being so helpful. All zones."

"Wow," she said faintly. "I can tell that *you* work for the government. The taxpayers' money provides you with a Rover, but all I get is a one-day travelcard."

He didn't laugh, and for a moment she thought she might have tipped him off as to her true state of mind, but then his avid eyes scanned her sheet-clad body again. "Is there anything I can do for you?" he asked, solicitously. "Anything you need?"

"Sleep," she said firmly. "lots and lots of sleep."

The next day, when Molly returned to the B&B, she was told that Francine had been found dead in bed, having taken an overdose. There were, apparently, no suspicious circumstances.

Not being paranoid – at least, not any more – Molly had to agree with that judgment, albeit grudgingly. If ever there'd been a person likely to turn up dead in a

B&B bed having taken an overdose, it was Francine. It probably hadn't even been suicide, given that Francine was such a dozy cow, although there wasn't any life insurance payout hanging on the coroner's verdict. Francine's kid was still with the foster-parents she'd gone to while Francine was last inside, so there was relatively little mess to tidy up.

Even a non-paranoid person could be forgiven, however, for noticing the beginnings of a pattern. Little anorectic Annie: abducted by aliens, then dead. Francine: abducted by aliens, then dead. Molly: abducted by aliens...

Well, she thought, *there's bugger all I can do about it, even if there's an angel in heaven who owes me a favour.* She didn't expect the favour to be returned. It was a sad commentary on the deterioration of her looks that no one had given her a better present than the man in black's travelcard since she had turned 30.

There was no funeral, as such, but when the formalities had all been concluded and the ashes had gone to wherever unclaimed ashes usually went, Molly and the B&B mums shared half a dozen bottles of cheap red that one of them had blagged off the local white van man by way of commemorating Francine's passing.

"At least we won't have to hear all that shit about being abducted by aliens again," said Deirdre from the third floor back, when the drink had overcome her inhibitions against speaking ill of the dead.

"Or that crap about men in black pretending to be DSS investigators," added Julie from the first floor, with a meaningful look at Molly.

"Everybody pretends to be DSS investigators nowadays," Molly said airily. "They think it's an easier way to get into your knickers for free than pretending to be CID. What's the world coming to?"

"Rack and ruin," Julie admitted.

"Crack and ruin," Sheila improvised, cackling so hard she could hardly light her next cig.

"Completely fucked over," Greta agreed. "Or is that just us?"

Thanks to the wine, whose effects combined synergistically with her double doses of miscellaneous chlorpromazine derivatives and Prozac, Molly fell into a far deeper sleep than was usual, and didn't even wake up when the aliens levitated her out of her bed and through the mysteriously-opened window.

She would probably have slept through everything except the rectal probe if things had gone according to the same pattern as before, but they didn't. This time, the aliens took her to a different space, far less spare in its decorations and far less glaringly lit, and sat her down in a chair made out of something like foam rubber, which moulded itself to her contours and flowed right around her midriff.

"I am sorry," said one of the aliens, with a distinct west country accent and a slight lisp, "but we shall accelerate soon, and you will feel a force of four gravities for a few moments. You will be weightless thereafter. It is best that you are secure."

"Don't mind me," Molly said sleepily. "I've been strapped into far worse contraptions than this." She didn't make the slightest attempt to study the hiero-

glyphic writing on the various green-glowing screens or the structure of the keyboard on which the alien's slender fingers were tapping – but the acceleration, when it came, pulled her back into the rubbery cradle with such horrid avidity that she thought her heart might give up. When the g-force vanished, she was extremely grateful.

"Bloody hell," she said, when she had drawn breath. "Don't you lot have antigravity machines or anything?"

The grey – who really did look grey now that the light was more subdued, as the man in black had said – turned two vast night-black eyes to stare at her, in what seemed like a sorrowful manner.

"We are sorry about your friend," the grey said. "We were not responsible."

"Nobody said you were," Molly countered, warily.

"This whole project is getting out of hand," the alien observed, mournfully. "O what a tangled web we weave, when first we practise to deceive! I love Scott, don't you? Poetry appreciation is the only way to really get to grips with an alien language."

Molly thought that if the greys had really got to grips with English they wouldn't split infinitives, and would probably recognize brave Sir Walter for the doggerel-merchant he was, but she supposed that a certain unrefinement of taste was one of the penalties of dealing with the kind of people they usually dealt with.

"I suppose you know that the men in black have had me in," she said cautiously. "They frisked me for viruses, but I don't think they found the biochip in my tit."

"Of course we know. We heard every word you said, and monitored every hormonal nuance of your psychosomatic response. We were grateful for your principled discretion. It's not every day we implant someone with your fine qualities."

"Maybe you should go hunting in more upmarket territory," Molly said.

"We used to," was the sad reply. "You humans have no idea how duplicitous your high-status individuals are."

"Oh, I think we have a pretty fair idea," Molly said. "Oxford and Cambridge were no good, then? I can believe that the entire population of Islington and Hampstead is way up the top end of the hypocrisy scale, but what about the Isle of Wight or Poole? Come on – there must be some nice people in Poole."

"Nice," said the alien, dolefully, "is not our number one criterion."

Molly thought about that for a moment. She had never been one to harbour delusions of grandeur, even if she had been the last true love of Elvis's life and the kind of person who could talk a fallen angel into getting right back up into the heavenly saddle, so she couldn't quite bring herself to believe that of all the people the aliens had abducted during the last 103 years she was the most worthy.

"What, exactly, do you want from me?" she asked, mildly.

"Actually," said the alien, "we'd like some advice. We feel that our presence here has become a little too confrontational, and we're not sure how – or even whether – we ought to continue the mission."

"Considering the way you've been carrying on so far," Molly said, figuring that if the biochip had her innards under such careful observation that they could read the

testimony of her hormones there was no point in pussyfooting around, "I'm astonished that it's taken you so long to get self-critical."

"Oddly enough," said the grey, "that's exactly what we think about humans."

"I'll give you that one," Molly conceded, gracefully. "So – what is your mission, exactly?"

"Basically," said the grey, "we're trying to figure out who we'd like to be. We've been living a gypsyish kind of existence ever since our own ecosphere had a purple fit and reverted to cyanobacterial slime. We have the technology to nudge it back to complexity, of course, but there doesn't seem to be much point in simply recapitulating the same evolutionary sequence as before. It's not so much that we worry about making the same mistakes again as the feeling that if we just put things back exactly the way they were we'd be deeply boring individuals. Wiser, of course – but somewhat stuck in a rut."

"Been there, done that, ripped off the t-shirt," Molly put in helpfully.

"That's about the size of it," agreed the diminutive alien. "We figure that reconstituting the ecosphere should be a learning experience, existentially speaking. We can genetically engineer ourselves, of course, to be more or less any kind of humanoid, within reason, but it's difficult to choose. There do seem to be some advantages to the human model, provided that we could ratchet up the rationality by a couple of orders of magnitude, but we have to be careful. It's a big decision, after all, and even with our technology it's going to take a couple of million years to get our ecosphere back into good shape. We wouldn't want to get half way through and then decide that we'd rather be more like the Cetians or the Eridanians. We've been hanging around Earth for a long time now, waiting for all the wars to finish, so that we could find out what human life is like when things are going well, but to tell you the truth, we're a little disappointed. Some us have begun to suspect that the human model is so utterly screwed up, hindbrainwise, that even a massive dose of rationality couldn't get it to a tolerable state of being. I know it smacks of desperation, given that you can hardly be objective, but we wondered whether you might have any thoughts on the matter."

Molly resisted the temptation to be flattered. She knew that it wasn't the quality of her mind that had enticed them to pick her as their agony aunt. They had picked her because she had been there, done that and ripped off the t-shirt, in more ways than one. She was an also-ran in the human race: someone who had never been blinkered by privilege; someone who had got down to the existential nitty-gritty.

"Well," she said, very carefully indeed. "I'd have to think about that. I wouldn't like to make an uninformed decision. It would need a certain amount of research and analysis."

"That's a sensible approach," the grey conceded. "We could help with that, if you'd be interested. We're on our way to the mothership right now, as it happens – we had to move it from the other side of the moon once Apollo got under way. You won't be able to make any sense of the library, but there are a dozen of us who speak reasonably good English. Mostly American English, I fear – but I spent a couple of years undercover in Devon."

Molly felt that it would be undiplomatic to mention the beast of Bodmin. She was concentrating very hard on the task of playing her cards *exactly* right.

"That would be a start," she conceded. "But there has to be an element of give and take here. I'm not an ungenerous person, as you presumably know, but what you're offering me is, in essence, a *business proposition*. If I'm to help you out, I'll need your full co-operation – and fair compensation."

"I quite agree," said the alien. "You work out exactly what it is you want, and we'll see what we can do."

It was the offer Molly had been waiting for all her life. She could hardly contain her excitement. She reached out a hand to touch the grey on the shoulder. The skin was soft, not reptilian at all, and in spite of the dim lighting she knew that it was silver through and through, and that within the slender torso there beat a heart of pure gold.

"Is there anything I can get you?" the alien asked, uncertainly. "Anything you need?"

"You have no idea how much," she answered.

Molly hadn't been back in her room for five minutes when the men in black kicked the door down and leapt through the opening. The one who'd interrogated her before had an automatic pistol in his right hand, and his sidekick was waving a pump-action shotgun.

When they found that she was alone in the room and that the window was nailed shut again they cursed, although they could hardly have been surprised. Molly could see Julie and Greta out in the corridor, mouths open to complain about the noise – but when they saw the men in black the protests died on their lips.

By the time the senior man had pulled himself together, smoothed his tie with the barrel of his gun and turned to Molly with what he hoped was a winning smile, his cover was well and truly blown. Everybody knew that DSS employees had to go through courtesy training to make sure that they never used phrases like *motherfucking bug-eyed monsters*, whether they were talking about clients or not. His companion stared at Julie and Greta, intimidating them into a hasty retreat in spite of the lop-sidedness of his moustache.

"Thank God you're all right, Molly," said the man with the pencil moustache. "We were very worried about you. When the tracking device we planted in your tooth told us that you were heading for the upper atmosphere, we thought you were a goner – and when it conked out five seconds after the ET told you that it was best to be secure we were sure you'd been rumbled as a spy."

"It was the sudden acceleration," Molly said apologetically. "I guess I bit down a bit too hard."

They hustled her down to the car, looking daggers at the curious eyes peeping through the ground-floor doors. Molly favoured Sheila's kids with a little wave, figuring that it was the only goodbye she'd have the chance to offer.

The men in black continued to wave their guns around as they loaded up the car, and made a big show of making sure they weren't being followed as the Rover darted off into the night.

"The greys are gone," Molly assured the man beside her. "I know that," he replied, gruffly. "It's the Americans I'm

worried about. They always eavesdrop on our bugs, and none of *theirs* have been taken to the mothership for at least a couple of years. If they saw a chance to debrief you before us... well, let's just say that they aren't *gentlemen*."

"I don't know," Molly said. "Back in the days when I was supporting a habit, their tourists seemed to be a lot less interested in weird stuff than your average Old Harrovian – but I suppose I only saw the cream of the crop at King's Cross. The regulars on *Jerry Springer* don't have passports, do they?"

"You'd better concentrate on keeping your memories in focus, Molly," he told her, with a slight edge of menace in his voice. "It's going to be a long night."

He meant it, too. There was only a couple of hours to go before dawn, but by that time Molly was banged up in a windowless and mirror-walled room, flat out on a table that was just as liberally equipped with straps as the one she'd been on before. She'd been stripped again, then lackadaisically draped in a hospital gown that certainly wasn't fresh from the laundry. The "long night" went on all through the next day, and didn't come to an end until the day after that, by which time the female officers had delved a lot deeper into her than was strictly necessary to recover the biochip from her breast. They'd injected her several times and had vamped a full pint of blood. This time, the formalized interrogation was carried out in parallel with the physical, and eventually extended far beyond the scope of the printed questions.

"I'm truly sorry about all that, Molly," the man with the moustache assured her, when his colleagues had finally called a halt, cleaned her up, given her something for the pain and tucked her up in a clean and comfortable bed in a room with a nice bright window. "We didn't want to hurt you, but we couldn't use a general anaesthetic while we were still using the pentothal to question you. We didn't know that the aliens had the kind of technology necessary to scramble your mind like that. We didn't even know that they knew enough about us to make all that shit up. Elvis I can understand – nine out of every ten American abductees expects to meet Elvis, and three come back convinced that they did, but fallen angels from a heaven where there isn't any time... Jesus, those guys are weird!"

"You know," said Molly, tiredly, "I'll bet you'd seem just as weird to them, if they could only get inside your head."

He laughed at that, but he was only trying to be clever. She already knew that he hadn't got a sense of humour – but he had taken off his tie. Obviously, he'd found that watching the interrogation from behind the mirror was rather tiring, although he didn't have a dull but insistent ache in an injured tit to remind him exactly how tough things had been at the sharp end.

"You knew where the biochip was all the time, didn't you," she said.

"Of course we did," he told her. "We're not stupid. We just didn't want the greys to know that we knew, in case they came back for seconds. We figured that if it could do such a good job recording for them, it could do its bit for us too. Now that it's been somewhere none of our bugs ever came back from in working order, it's well worth our while to try to crack the code. Don't feel too bad about the

way they worked over your memories. You're still *compos mentis*, and you're not carrying any viruses you didn't have before, although I hope you'll forgive me for mentioning that you had rather more than your fair share before. We'll keep you under observation for a few days, but when you're well enough to leave you can put this behind you and move forward. The greys won't come back for you again – we're pretty sure about that, given that they must know that we have the biochip."

He wasn't sure about anything. He was just saying what he thought she wanted to hear.

"You know better than to repeat any of this outside, of course," he said. "You'd only be buying a ticket to the Maudsley, and you already know what *that's* like. You might not like what we just did to you but I hope you're intelligent enough to understand why we had to do it. We're your friends, Molly, not your enemies – maybe the only friends you've got. I know what you're thinking – with friends like *those* and all that – but you have to get past that. It's us against them, Molly. Humans against aliens. We have to find out what they're up to, any way we can. You're a hero, Molly. Come the day we get rid of the nasty little buggers for good and all, you'll have played your part. Maybe we'll even be able to give you a medal. We can certainly give you a little better compensation than we gave you last time."

"Don't tell me," Molly said. "A second-class ticket to anywhere in Network South-East."

"Better than that," he assured her. "Cash in hand. Enough to buy all the over-the-counter tranks you want, and then some – or a fully comprehensive detox, if that's what you'd prefer."

"I'm not really worth it," Molly observed, with heavy sarcasm. "I've been fucked too many times, in every orifice, to command a high price from decent men like you."

He looked at her sharply then, with naked suspicion. "Don't get smart, Molly," he said. "We know where you live. We'll *always* know where you live."

She wasn't stupid enough to parry that one. She had to let him think that he'd won for a little while longer.

"Are you feeling okay," he said, when he finally made ready to leave. "Is there anything you need?"

"Now that you come to mention it," she said, letting her tongue play momentarily upon her lips, "there is a little something you could do, if you really wouldn't mind."

The greys could have picked her up again any time after the first three weeks, but Molly wanted to make sure that she'd got the job done. She knew that the men in black would cotton on eventually, but she figured that it was worth keeping the ball rolling anyhow. The aliens didn't know how successful the men in black would be in extracting information from the captured biochip, because they didn't know how much the men in black already knew, so they hadn't been able to quantify the risk for her, but they'd assured her that if things *did* get sticky they could get her out in one piece. She trusted them.

When the Rover 2000 screeched to a halt beside her King's Cross pitch, she wasn't frightened. Indeed, she felt preternaturally calm as she totted up the days in her head, multiplied the days by seven, and multiplied

the figure she got by a further fudge-factor in order to estimate the total number of people who'd so far been exposed. It wasn't huge, but it was big enough. London might no longer be the cultural and financial hub of the world, but a lot of wheels turned around it.

The man with the pencil moustache bundled her into the back of the car and slammed the door behind him.

"You were supposed to be clean," he said, in a voice which had more terror in it than wrath. "We were all in quarantine till they told us you were clean. They *swore* you weren't carrying anything that hadn't shown up the first time, and that it was all common-or-garden shit. I thought it was odd that you'd gone back to the game, even though I never doubted for a moment that you were a slag through and through, but do you know what I told myself? I told myself that you were worried about the chunk we had to cut out of your tit. I told myself that you were anxious about still being *attractive*. But you *knew* didn't you? You actually *knew*."

"You're the one who watched while they had me stark naked and strapped down, questioning me under pen-tothal," Molly pointed out. "Everything I know, you know."

"All that shit about Elvis and angels," he spat at her, as the wrath began to climb out of the terror. "It was all just *cover*."

"Oh no," said Molly mildly. "That was all true. It was the plausible stuff that was the *cover*. Double bluff, you see – trees in forests, all that sort of thing."

"I was being *kind*," he yelled. "I was doing you a *favour*."

He actually seemed to believe it. He was enough of a public schoolboy to fool himself into thinking that he really hadn't screwed her for the sake of his own twisted power trip, but as an act of pure good-hearted charity. At least none of her more recent encounters had involved that level of self-deception.

"That's the difficulty, you see," she murmured. "How could they ever have decided, if they couldn't see us at our best? How could they ever have figured out what possibilities we had, unless they could get rid of all the crap that was obscuring the view? They didn't want to do it, because they're scientists at heart, and they have ethical as well as methodological reservations about observers interfering with the properties of that which is being observed, but it *was* the only way."

"It's going to kill us all, isn't it?" the man in black said, the fever of his paranoia having reached its final crisis. "AIDS was just the rehearsal, but this is the main event. How many people have you turned into carriers? They knew we'd already screened you for viruses and prions, so they just borrowed the protein coats from all the ones you were already carrying, and stuck new cargoes of DNA into every last one – and we fell for it. We took you in and we let you out, and we watched you go back on the game, and we were *too fucking slow to figure it out*. You've helped them kill us all, haven't you?"

"Don't be silly," Molly said. "Why would I want to do that? Why would *anyone* want to do that? If they'd wanted the world, they'd have taken it a hundred years ago. You surely must have figured out that they wanted something much more difficult to obtain than *that*."

That took him aback, and a little of the wrath evapo-

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Illustration by Shaun Tan

rated, along with a little of the terror. "You poor fool," he said eventually. "They lied to you, didn't they? They lied to you, and you fell for it. No wonder they wanted someone like you – someone they could play for a sucker."

"No wonder," she agreed mildly. "But you're not actually dead, are you, darling? You're not even dying, are you? Just feeling a bit funny, hindbrainwise. It'll pass. Believe me, darling, it *will* pass. Think of it as an adventure, if you can. I think you will be able to. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but eventually. We have no idea what we might become, given the right sort of help – but it really will be wonderfully exciting. There'll be others like me, of course – there probably already are, on the other side of the Atlantic and the other side of the world. Not *exactly* the same, of course – been here, done that, didn't bother with the t-shirt. You may think you've been living in interesting times for the last 40 years, Mister Man in Black, but you haven't seen the half of it yet, or even the tenth. I almost wish that I could be around to share it with you, but that isn't the deal."

Perhaps he was far enough gone to be getting past his panic, or perhaps it was his training reasserting itself. At any rate, he almost relaxed.

"What is it, if not the doomsday plague?" he asked, in the manner of a man who really wanted to know, and was at last prepared to listen.

"It's the stuff of saints and scientists," she said. "Vision. Ecstasy. Not the sort that fries your brain – more the sort that will bring it very gently to the boil, and simmer it till it's done. I can't promise that you'll love it, but you sure as hell won't find it boring."

He wanted to know much more, and she would have been prepared to tell him, always provided that he'd asked politely, but as the Rover sped southwards over Vauxhall Bridge it was suddenly bathed in bright white light that poured down from above. The man in black knew exactly what that was.

"Don't worry," Molly said. "They haven't come for you."

"You were in on it all the way," he whispered, as if he couldn't quite believe it even now. "You knew everything. You went along with it."

He didn't know the half of it. She might have told him that it had been her plan, but he didn't give her a chance. The anger and the terror were making themselves felt again.

"I knew you were a slag," the man in black went on, his voice rising in pitch as well as in volume, "but I didn't have you pegged as a traitor to the whole human race. What did they offer you, Molly? *What are they giving you in return?*"

"Just a travelcard," she said, as the window of the car wound down of its own accord and she floated out into the starry night. "They're on a budget too – but theirs really is *all zones*."

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Francis Amery's first two stories about the adventures of Molly, "When Molly Met Elvis" and "Molly and the Angel," appeared in issues 118 and 145 of *Interzone*. He lives in Berkshire, and is known for his translations of French fantasy.



## *Christopher Kenworthy*

**I**t was 1995 when England began to rot. I'm not talking about the decay of civilization or the erosion of values associated with that time. It's more to do with the green unpleasant land itself, than the aftermath of Thatcher. Forget the headlines about mad cow disease and superbugs; the real signs of disorder came in the form of pale animals. It was mentioned on the occasional news broadcast, but most people don't remember that during that hot summer there were sightings of colourless frogs, blonde foxes and white rabbits. Wild animals of all kinds were born without pigment.

*It must be something to do with the heat*, we were told, as though summer had bleached them. It was always the job of scientists to come up with a theory like that for the news, without any research or evidence, just to reassure people nothing too weird was happening. It didn't seem to matter that the scientific method had been abandoned in preference for conjecture. An explanation had been provided, and most people seemed to forget the curiosity.

I didn't, because I saw the changes at first hand. We lived on the outskirts of a village in Yorkshire, so that a two-minute walk led me into fields and trees, with all the houses out of sight. Even though I was only 14, I was allowed to wander off at will. I spent the evenings with friends, smoking and drinking outside the Spar shop, but I preferred to spend the days alone. I'd gathered from films that an idyllic childhood takes place wandering in the countryside, but it had never been warm enough for that before. As the warmth increased, I spent more and more time in the fields and woods. By May of that year it looked as though something had gone wrong with the weather.

Until then, global warming had turned out to be quite disappointing. There'd always been this assumption that

the oceans would rise, wiping out the hideous seaside towns, and that we'd be treated to some Mediterranean-style summers. It never happened, and I'd grown up used to mild winters and constant rain. That year was the first time that summer baked. The horizon was always hidden in a shimmery haze, brooks ran dry, earth cracked and grass died. Wherever you went, the ground crunched, and there were the sounds of grasses curling and seeds popping. There was a general panic about running out of water, and the main supply was cut off. We had to get our drinking water from standpipes. Most people stopped bathing, making do with a wash in the sink, but I used to walk to the pond in Cockerton woods to swim every day. It was there that I first saw the white fish.

At first I assumed they were normal fish that had become visible as the water level dropped. Being so exposed they were easy pickings for the birds, and they were eaten within a week. It was around July that white animals became more prevalent. On my walks I saw maggot-coloured wasps and flies, a hedgehog whose spines had been drained, and frogs so pale you could make out the blood and meat beneath their white skin. It never occurred to me that this could be some twist of genetics, or a development; it looked to me as though these animals were going rotten before they'd even died. And I wasn't far wrong.

When something rots, it is broken down to its component parts. These animals were the first indication that the complexity of biological form was becoming unstable. The heat had nothing to do with it, but it's always easy to blame the weather.

The next time there was heat like that, was the summer I met Joanne. I'd moved to London for the sake of work,

but also to draw a line under a failed relationship. Until that evening, I was certain I was going to remain single for at least twelve months. We met on the hottest day of the year. The streets stank of rotten fruit and tarmac. Shops that sold cold drinks were unbearably hot, because the refrigerators were belting out so much heat. People glistened.

We'd both been invited to a party, by somebody we didn't know all that well. It was held in the back garden of one of those huge houses in Maida Vale; a long lawn, enclosed by walls on either side, hidden in ivy. Joanne was the first person I spoke to after my friends had paired off in conversation, and we talked all night.

She was taller than me, and one of the few people that was dressed as casually; just jeans and a tee-shirt. She wore no makeup and hadn't tied her hair back, which allowed her to move it away from her face every few minutes. When we'd been chatting for a while she took a bottle of wine from the icebox, and urged me to sit with her on the grass. Even when it had gone dark, and cooled, we stayed there, our conversation turning to whispers so that we had to move closer together.

She worked in a parasite clinic; a relatively new profession, but one of the few growth industries.

"We deal with new species more than anything," she said. "But not the random ones; it's usually manufactured species. Mostly we remove fat flukes from peoples' thighs. Which isn't very pleasant."

A few years previously, modified parasites had been introduced into the bloodstream of obese people, to eat at their fat. Unsurprisingly, it was an inexact science. By the time patients made it to the clinic, she said, many of them had been half-eaten.

"But I never had much sympathy for fat as an illness, anyway," she said. "The real sickness is the desire for more and more. Other people are starving to death, but rather than cutting down on how much we consume, we invent another product to make our greed bearable."

I couldn't help laughing, even though I agreed with her.

"You can't introduce these things and expect nothing to happen," she added. "If you create life, it seeks out a home."

We were both drunk, but not to the point of ranting, so much as believing that what we said mattered. It felt like our conversations could make a difference.

Shortly after that, I made it clear I was attracted to her, and she made it equally clear that nothing could happen. She didn't say why that was the case, but neither did she cool off. She said intimate things, the sort of drunken comments you'd make if you wanted to start a relationship; things about liking me and wanting to see me again.

"When people who are attracted to each other try to be friends," I said, "it never works." I realized I'd implied that she was attracted to me, and was fumbling for a way to cover up, but she saved me by speaking first.

"I want to see you again."

"But just as friends?" I asked.

"What do you mean *just?*" she smiled. "There's nothing more valuable."

It's rare for people to announce that they are friends to each other. Even when you've known somebody for

years, and they introduce you as "my friend" it can be a surprising statement. To hear her saying this was like having a person say they love you on a one night stand. Except that I wanted to believe her. I was so moved, that once I got home I stayed awake all night, more excited than if we'd kissed. I'd had reasonably close friendships with women before, but it had never felt like this. I was certain it couldn't work.

I found new species fascinating, but also a bit disgusting. In the same way I'd been impressed by the pale animals, I wanted to hear about every new species that came along. The process I'd seen when I was young, with colour rotting away, had become more widespread, but it was only ever part of the story. Once a creature had been made unstable, its form could be passed onto other species, simply through consumption. When one animal ate another, it could take on the features of its prey. Plants appeared to be spared from the process, perhaps because of their stronger cell walls, but animal patterns were spreading. The blended results were usually hideous, and unable to breed, but you'd see them more frequently. Cats with rabbit-shaped bodies and dogs with scales were common in London, but the combinations in the countryside were said to be far worse.

There were some benefits to these changes. People stopped eating meat, because of the risk of changing into something else. Nobody wanted to risk eating a sausage if it meant they might become a pig. There was brief speculation about enhancing the body, taking on the forms of wolves or leopards by consuming their rotten flesh, but the few accidents that occurred left people with small minds, frantic and panicked by their new form. In every case they had to be put down.

Meat went out of fashion within a month. Fast food outlets were forced to close down, because they didn't have the imagination to cook good vegetarian meals, and the death of the meat industry freed up millions of acres; some land was adapted for farming, but the rest was set aside for reforestation. Sadly, this process didn't stop people seeing animals as products. If anything, the situation became worse, because animals could be tinkered with to perform new tasks. Modified creatures were used to produce medicines and materials.

We started using the changes before we'd even worked out what caused them. Some people thought it was some kind of stored evolutionary reaction, helping new species to come into being. Others thought it had to be some kind of virus, carrying genetic code. A few guessed it might have been caused by pollution, the chemicals weakening form over decades. Whatever the truth, the blending of species was something that industry embraced. To an extent it could be controlled. The fat-eating flukes, for instance, were made by feeding intestinal cells from rotten dogs to standard human liver-flukes.

We used the process, even though we didn't know how it worked. In that sense it was no different from nuclear power or chemotherapy. We knew enough to use it, but had no idea what was really going on.

It wasn't all that surprising, then, when things started

getting out of hand. The process started to occur even without consumption. Forms were spreading like infection, perhaps passed on by flies or water; nobody knew how it was happening, but species were mixing at an alarming rate. They called them Fast Breeder Reactors, for the speed with which they spread. And whatever had protected plants in the past no longer kept them pure. It was only a matter of time, people said, until humans became infected with change.

My friendship with Joanne went surprisingly well, because we never tired of each other. I couldn't work out why the act of having sex would change things, but knew that if we slept together, different expectations would occur. You accept things about friends that would enrage you in a partner; it's easier to find things endearing. When it's a friendship, you trust that the other person loves you. If we'd once had sex, we'd both start worrying about the others' thoughts and feelings. We'd probably start getting mad at each other.

Even so, I couldn't help but wonder why she maintained that distance. I was sure she must have been hurt and was protecting herself. She claimed it wasn't that, but that she didn't feel the need to have sex with me. The subject came up every few weeks.

"Do you dislike sex?" I asked.

"I love it."

"So is it just me?"

"I just don't want to yet. Maybe, in a few years I'll need that from somebody."

She modified that statement over the following months, so that it gradually became, "If it's going to be anyone, it'll be you." We joked about staying friends for five years and then trying to get passionate when she finally felt ready. Whatever tension there may have been was usually dissipated by these discussions.

There was something about our friendship that allowed more intimacy than a relationship. If you're in a long-term relationship, you do everything you can to mix with other people, because being alone reeks of tiny-minded coupledom. As we were only friends, we didn't feel guilty when we isolated ourselves. If parties were shit or gatherings dull, we'd leave and spend the rest of the night together, because we knew we'd have a better time that way.

We even went on holiday with each other, mountain climbing in the Lakes. It was that weekend that we first saw helicopters coming down a valley, spraying the fields with a yellow-white liquid. It was something they'd been threatening to do for months, in an attempt to stop things spreading.

Whatever it was they were spraying, they'd assured everybody it was safe. I remembered that old black and white footage of kids being sprayed with DDT to show how safe it was, just a few years before it was found to be deadly. And I remembered ministers feeding their children with beef to prove it was free of BSE, months before the opposite was finally proven. The spraying made me nervous.

"You know the irony," Joanne said. "It was probably spraying that caused all this in the first place. Constant pressure from pesticides might have caused complexity

to give up."

"I'm not keen on it either," I said, "but we have to do something."

"When I was about six," Joanne said, "I started choking on a boiled sweet. I was blue in the face, unable to even cough. My Mum kept feeding me bread and water, in an attempt to get it down, but my Dad was thumping me on the back, and grabbing me around the stomach to make it come back up." She gestured at the fields, wet with the yellow spray. "That's all that's happening with nature; they're pushing and pulling it, rather than letting it settle."

"Which method worked, in the end," I asked, "with the boiled sweet?"

"Neither. It just dissolved and went down of its own accord."

We'd often talked about what would happen when one of us eventually met somebody else. It would be ridiculous to close our friendship down, just because a new relationship started. We both knew the friendship could decay, though, unless we worked to keep it alive.

A couple of times I'd met people I might have gone out with, if it wasn't for the value I placed on my friendship with Joanne. I resolved to stay single unless I met somebody who moved me more than her. We'd been friends for two years when I met Peta. We kissed on the first night, but then she had to go away for two weeks. She promised to see me as soon as she got back. I must have been a nightmare to cope with for Joanne during that fortnight. As soon as Peta came back I threw myself into a relationship with her. We spent our first weekend in bed, which meant I went three days without seeing Joanne. She complained briefly, but then encouraged me to get on with it.

Joanne and I saw each other a few times during the next two months, and she even came out with Peta and myself one afternoon.

It was a surprise when Joanne called, having been out of touch for a week, to say she needed to see me. I offered to go round, but she said she was coming to me.

She brought wine and cheese, set them on the table between us, and said, "We'll talk later. Let's just enjoy ourselves for now."

The wine she'd picked was a white Botrytus, infected with the "noble rot" to enrich its flavour. She'd chosen blue cheese, so deeply veined with fungus I felt I had to comment.

"Everything you eat is rotten." She didn't answer, so I said, "I know you like secondhand things, but this is going a bit far."

"Haven't you noticed that curries taste better the day after you make them? And wine should always be left for a while. Even fruit's at its best when it's close to corruption. It's the nature of things to improve if you give them time."

"Am I missing something?"

"We like things that are spoiled. It makes them sweeter."

"I don't know what you're getting at."

She put her head in her hands, so that I thought she

was crying, but then she looked up and said, "Isn't it obvious?"

"So you would, now?" I asked, being so vague I was surprised at how easily she understood.

"Yes I would."

"Even though you know that could ruin my relationship with Peta?"

"Yes."

"Then why?"

"Because I feel like I'm losing you."

"Not because you want to?"

"And because I want to." She waited for a long time before she said, "Don't you?"

When I woke, Joanne's eyes were open, and she was rubbing her arm, looking at the window.

"There's a storm coming," she said.

"Are you trying to be prophetic again?"

"No, it's something I picked up." She stroked her arm, and I saw the tiny hairs quivering. "Did you know plants can tell when there's going to be a storm? They feel the electricity, and their metabolism speeds up to take advantage of the rain. That's why plants are so green after a downpour; they're taking it all in."

"And you caught that?"

"I think so," she said continuing to stroke her flesh.

"It's started then?"

"Do you mean the changes, or us?"

"I don't really know."

It was difficult to tell whether it had been a one-off – a way of spoiling my relationship with Peta – or something we were going to continue. We weren't touching, and doing so would feel like more of an event than it had last night.

"Did you sleep?" I asked.

"Not as well as you. Your body assumed I was her. You held on to me."

"Do you regret what happened?"

She pointed at the bedside table, and spoke sadly. "When I took off my watch and my bangles, and put them here, I thought *This is where she puts her stuff every night*. Her presence here must be stronger than mine."

We didn't talk much, and for the first time we tried to fill the silences. In an effort to find out what she wanted, without having to analyze my own desires, I asked her if things would change.

"You mean can we still be friends." She said it as a statement, rather than a question, and sounded upset that I'd asked.

"I'm disappointed," I said, feeling angry. "Is sex really so inevitable?"

"It is if things are going to develop. We never had any real commitment. I always knew if you went out with somebody, it would be over for us."

"Why does everything have to develop? I liked our friendship because it was the one thing that stayed the same."

I could hear rain outside, hitting dry soil.

She said, "Now, I want things to change. I want to worry about you. I want you to care where I am. If I'm late, I want you to miss me."

Lying there, it occurred to me that things only change when they have to. If there's no pressure to move on, things will always stay the same. Only when I'd moved on, did Joanne come to me. And only when she did that, was I able to release my feelings for her. There was no point in seeing our night together as a mistake or accident. We'd taken what had always been there, and allowed it to grow into something new.

For a moment I thought there was something wrong with my eyes, because her face drained of colour. When it happened again, I knew it was the glare of lightning. It was so far away I couldn't hear the thunder, but it made her face so pale I thought I could see the veins showing through her skin.

**Christopher Kenworthy** tells us that he has been submitting stories to *Interzone*, on and off, since (gulp) 1986. "The Rot" is his first appearance here, but in the meantime he has published many stories elsewhere. His novel *The Winter Inside* will be published by Serpent's Tail next spring. He is from Lancashire, but presently lives in Australia.

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All it takes is a little imagination!

# 'SCUSE ME WHILE I KISS THE SKY

## AN OPEN LETTER TO A YOUNG SCIENCE FICTION SCHOLAR

*Gary Westfahl*



**B**elieve it or not, my works are not generated in a mad frenzy and rushed into print; rather, I do pause to reflect, reconsider, and revise before submitting anything, though the process may result in the calm decision to emulate the tone of a frenzied madman. At times, when discussing matters beyond my usual areas of expertise, I may even e-mail a draft to a colleague to get some feedback before proceeding. If the piece involves science fiction and children's literature, I may run it past my friend Andy Sawyer; if it involves science fiction cinema, I may bother a certain graduate student who has written about science fiction films.

Recently, then, after completing a pithy, 10,000-word exegesis of one of my favourite science fiction films, *This Island Earth* (1955), for a forthcoming book, I sent the draft to this student; and, while the response inspired a few minor revisions, it was more impressive for what it revealed about the radically different conceptual universes we inhabit. Suddenly, I felt oddly tempted to play the grey-beard (having now been active in the field for more than a decade!) and offer some sage advice to the neophyte on the business of analyzing and writing about science fiction.

First, in the section of the paper where I catalogued the charming idiocies that permeate *This Island Earth*, I touched upon the scientist's purported research into the "conversion of lead into uranium," noting that the only ways to transmute heavy elements were radioactive decay and nuclear fission, both of which must begin with radioactive elements and must end with elements of a lower atomic number; thus, proposing to convert a heavy element with no radioactive isotopes into an element with a higher atomic number made no sense. I considered adding a discussion of the possibility — rather, the impossibility — of somehow duplicating the extraordinarily high temperature and pressure within a supergiant star to achieve some sort of fusion between lead atoms and other atoms

to create uranium atoms, but felt no need for belaboured scientific explanations in order to establish the film's quintessential stupidity in this area.

Surprisingly, you found this excursion into elementary physics revelatory and impressive, and speculated that I might have some sort of concealed scientific background. Far from it! I do not and cannot claim any expertise in scientific matters; all I know about science is what anyone who studies science fiction should know.

For better or worse, science fiction is a genre founded upon, and sometimes claiming to derive authority from, a commitment to scientific accuracy, making this a relevant area of inquiry. This doesn't mean that scientific accuracy is the most important thing in science fiction — it isn't. This doesn't mean that scientifically inaccurate texts are necessarily bad — some of the science fiction works I most admire have little to do with science, or are riddled with errors. All this means is that, in order to properly evaluate a work of science fiction, one of the many qualities you must possess is sufficient knowledge to assess its scientific accuracy. I'm sorry to be blunt, but in my view, if the phrase "conversion of lead into uranium" doesn't immediately make you giggle, you should either brush up on your science or find another area of literature to study.

I was also bemused by your relentless determination to discern references to contemporary events in both the film and the original novel by Raymond F. Jones. In your eyes, the stories appear

to comment on such matters as the Korean War, President Truman's seizure of the steel industry, debates over American atomic policy, and the rise of the "organization man." As it happens, I believe these spontaneous theories about the novel and film are fanciful, but am more disturbed by the critical mindset they represent: the notion that all creative writers are robotic recorders of current events, consciously or subconsciously awaiting the arrival of the newspaper every morning so they can thrust the headlines into their latest story. Sure, people are influenced by, and comment on, their times, but if we have any respect for the human intellect, we must grant the possibility that people can also be influenced by, and comment on, things other than their immediate present. As I am writing this, Americans are still debating the implications of the Columbine High School shootings while NATO bombs are falling on Yugoslavia. And what does this column have to do with these developments? Next to nothing, obviously. And if writers of nonfiction have the power to wrest themselves away from the concerns of the moment, writers of fiction must enjoy the same power.

Further, though commentators of all sorts can get absurdly carried away when detecting references to current politics or culture in literature and film, I feel this is an especially infelicitous approach to science fiction. For one of the unique strengths of the genre is its ability to address, in a direct and literal fashion, the grandest of cosmic questions: what is this vast, uncaring universe all about? Why are we here? Are there other beings like us? Science fiction does not always deal with these issues, and rarely does so with great artistic success, but the impulse to do so is strong and pervasive. Yes, the genre also includes satirical or allegorical representations of contemporary persons and events, but just as a cigar is sometimes only a cigar, in science fiction, sometimes the universe is the universe, eternity is eternity, and aliens are aliens.

Some seemingly astute observers,

*Above: Exeter's first appearance, via "Interocitor," in *This Island Earth**

of course, have argued the contrary. Since science fiction is written by humans, all its characters are necessarily humans in disguise, and all its perspectives are necessarily human. Since science fiction is written in the present, all its stories are necessarily about the present, not the future. In other words, despite pretensions to the contrary, the writing of science fiction involves nothing more than the production of colourful self-portraits and journalism as seen in a funhouse mirror.

Which is to say, it is impossible to dream.

I will not debate the logic behind these positions, but feel a deep sense of gratitude because my innumerable ancestors who aspired to look beyond their immediate environment, improve their lives, and broaden their understanding of the cosmos did not embrace such pernicious nonsense.

To be sure, science fiction films, as collectively crafted enterprises of popular culture, may be less visionary than science fiction literature and more plausibly read as disguised reflections of contemporary events and concerns. But the spirit of written science fiction can infect its celluloid cousins as well. The creators of *This Island Earth* had read Jones's novel and, as their statements suggest, were definitely inspired by its cosmic perspective and were interested more in exploring the sobering implications of the phrase "this island Earth" than in, say, working a reference to the Army-McCarthy hearings into the story.

Reading over your message, then, I feel sorry for you; because, if you watch science fiction films of the 1950s solely in order to detect Communists or Indians in alien disguise, you will miss everything that is profound and magical about them. You will never fully appreciate the poignancy of *The Man from Planet X*, the inspiring altruism of *It Came from Outer Space*, the befuddled awe of *This Island Earth*, or the crazed affirmation of the human condition in *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. You will instead transform a fascinating and multifaceted body of works into a dull, reductive history lesson.

Of course, for graduate students of literature, dull reductionism is often the name of the game. Young scholars writing dissertations may be expected to construct their own critical machines to eviscerate whichever texts happen to lie in their way. There is nothing inherently wrong with this: theoretical models as a basis for interpretation can be useful, and aspiring commentators should learn how to build them. For my own dissertation, I constructed – more

accurately, I unearthed, oiled, and polished – the Hugo Gernsback/John W. Campbell machine, and over the years I have found it helpful in analyzing many science fiction works.

However – and here is my final lesson for the apprentice – science fiction is a large and variegated field, and no single machine will work in every case. A while back, when I struggled to determine why John Brunner's *The Crucible of Time* was one of my favourite science fiction novels, the Gernsback/Campbell machine was no help at all; instead, I had to build a new machine on the spot. And to figure out why *This Island Earth* was one of my favourite

*“...what is this vast, uncaring universe all about? Why are we here? Are there other beings like us?”*

movies, I surprisingly needed to activate the Olaf Stapledon machine – to recognize that the peculiar appeal of the film derived from its determination to convey, in a manner all the more powerful because of its ineptitude, the futility and insignificance of human activity in the humbling context of a limitless universe.

My conclusion is that a science fiction commentator must begin with the text and only the text, must allow the text to sing its own song, and only then should determine which machine is required to illuminate and elucidate that particular song.

So, while this may seem to contradict everything I have said, the critical approach you espouse is perfectly appropriate when analyzing *some* science fiction films of the 1950s. If, for example, you elect to revisit the most overpraised and overanalyzed film of that decade, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, you will undoubtedly be driven, like other commentators, to a political/cultural/sociological/psychological interpretation, because nothing about the film is science-fictional in the

ways I describe – though if you feel compelled to deal with the so-called "paranoia" of the 1950s (as if fears of communist invasion and nuclear annihilation were entirely irrational), I'd recommend *Quatermass II (Enemy from Space)* as a refreshing alternative. *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* invites analysis as a parable about suppressed male homosexuality, with homosexuality quaintly represented by periodic donning of a grotesque rubber mask. And what on Earth is going on in *The Monolith Monsters*? I wish I knew. I would love to engage in an extended study of the science fiction films of the 1950s, but I can't imagine cramming them all into the same Procrustean bed.

When the genre was younger, the only people who wrote about science fiction were people who loved science fiction, and while the results of their labours varied in quality, the sincerity of their interest and devotion was unquestionable. Today, however, science fiction commentary faces its own invasion of the pod people, tenure-seeking academics who seize upon science fiction works as new pieces of meat to send through their grinders to make some tired point about man's inhumanity to woman, the insidious persistence of postcolonial thought, or the impossibility of crafting coherent narratives in our postmodern world. And this may represent your wisest career move: determine what sorts of interpretative contortions are currently fashionable, grab some science fiction texts, submit them to the regimen, and generate mounds of polysyllabic discourse which will lead to a college teaching position and promotions while needlessly wasting valuable trees and computer memory before your words drift into well-deserved oblivion.

Or, as the alternative, stupidest career move, you can dedicate yourself to the unending challenge of thoughtfully analyzing science fiction, employ only those tools that are appropriate for the task at hand, and wrestle with the bewildering variety of issues raised by its numerous texts, including the foundational questions raised by humanity's existence in an immense and incomprehensible cosmos that will always remain important, no matter how naïvely they are expressed or how clumsily they are confronted. And, if you follow that course while struggling to stay afloat, you just might write something that will be worth reading. This is what I foolishly persist in attempting to do, and I wish you luck should you be foolish enough to do the same.

**Gary Westfahl**

Because big-book heroic fantasy has become so stylized, my approach to each new offering is becoming ever more concerned with the book's non-literary aspects – an evolution exacerbated by the observation that stylistically they tend to crowd the middle range. The truly atrocious writers whom I occasionally lambast are almost always doing something else, as are most of those whose style I care to praise (OK, Tom and Guy – you're exceptions). Thus being so, I began by noting that Steven Erikson's *Gardens of the Moon* (Bantam, £9.99, C-format) is a very fully realized item: two nicely drawn maps, a 4-side *dramatis personae*, and a 6-side glossary. No genealogy, calendar, or military command structure but this is only the first "tale of the Malazan Book of the Fallen"; doubtless Erikson has matter in reserve.

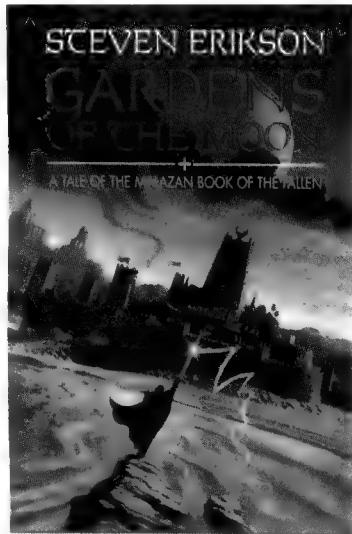
The book begins very much *in medias res*, the *res* being the invasion and conquest of the usual sub-continental peninsula by the brutal and magically fortified armies of the megalomaniac Empress Laseen: battle, murder and sudden death against a backdrop of warfare, crime and intrigue. The characters are a hard-bitten lot, notable for their dislike and fully justified distrust of one another; Laseen, being paranoid as well as megallo, is altogether too fond of wasting those of her own who might at some time pose some real or imaginary threat. As for the dislike... Sergeant Whiskeyjack of the elite Bridgeburners Squad has never quite taken to Sorry, a young girl recruited a couple of years back at the tender age of 15:

He'd watched her put a knife to three local mercenaries they'd taken prisoner in Greydog – ostensibly to glean information but, he recalled with a shudder, it had been nothing like that. Not an act of expedience. He had stared aghast, horrified, as Sorry set to work on their loins...

Erikson writes better than most, in a lush, sensuous style which comes into strong tension with the manic and menacing ambience, but his imagination is heavily canted to the lurid, and his emotional range to the violet. Few of the interested parties, who include sundry low-grade gods, a carrion bird of supernatural powers and intelligence, the undead relict of an

## A Crowded Canvas

Chris Gilmore



extinct race and a marionette animated by the deranged spirit of a deceased sorcerer, seem to have much fun, or prospect thereof; sardonic amusement at the discomfiture and painful death of a hated adversary is about the best anyone can hope for, and that makes for a negative-sum game. That being so I found it difficult to care very much who won, but was happy to watch the mayhem from a safe distance.

I was less happy with the overall structure: there were rather too many new characters and magical artefacts introduced *ad hoc* in the later chapters: Laseen's non-appearance as a viewpoint character leaves an awkward gap, and Erikson's perfunctory attempts at love-interest have no real bearing on the plot. Even so, this is a promising first novel; with a bit more discipline and a less crowded canvas, his next should be better.

In our own world magic usually operates covertly, and people don't believe in it – often to their cost. In stock fantasy worlds technology has rarely reached gunpowder, and hardly ever harnessed electricity. There have been a few attempts to make science and magic operate openly and in tandem, by Heinlein a couple of times and by Simak in some later novels, but they haven't generally

BOOKS



REVIEWED

succeeded all that well, and have dated badly; the tropes of fantasy are ageless, while science moves on.

One such was Poul Anderson's *Operation Chaos* of 1971, featuring all-American werewolf Steve Mutachek and Ginny, his witch wife; with *Operation Luna* (Tor, \$22.95) we find them just ten years older, though as rather more have fallen on ourselves Anderson has had to revert to the tone of a younger phase. Knowing what he's doing, he does it proficiently, but from early on I found myself wishing he was doing something else – have I not been pleased to praise him for continuing to develop his talents, instead of keeping on with the same old stuff?

Nor is this vintage stuff, being a juvenile tricked out as adult fare. Mutachek and his friends are attempting a mechanical/magical mission to the Moon, but someone bent on sabotage has launched a triple attack on the physical, magical and bureaucratic planes and each must be countered separately. Well enough, but this is a complex universe, in which it is assumed that the Beings of every mythology, extant and otherwise, have their reality. Here the emphasis is on Pueblo, Norse and Japanese, a hard enough combination to swallow even if we weren't required to accept Christian and Jewish as well. The result is inevitably rather pious, and made more so by Anderson's subtext, which is to present his conception of the ideal mature marriage. I don't begrudge Steve and Ginny their happiness, but good sex makes poor drama.



Anderson handles the story itself with his usual fluency; the different aspects hang together well, there's variety of scene, and some excellent individual passages, especially those set in the crypt of St Oswald's (York) and among the roots of Yggdrasil. But when he strives for the numinous it eludes him; the reader can take only so many changes of tone, and if you insist on including a magic sword that talks like one part Scarlet Pimpernel to three of Colonel Blimp, and a dwarfish engineer who gets uproariously drunk and smashes the furniture, you sacrifice your pretensions to be taken seriously. An uncharacteristic reluctance to allow even a single minor good guy to get killed in action detracts further. Anderson quotes stanzas from his and Ron Ellik's *Childish Edda* at a couple of points, and at bottom this is childlike entertainment. Recommended only up to age 12.

The English tradition of high comedy is second to none, which may be why we tend to discount the artistry of which low comedy is capable. OK, there were *Take It From Here* and *Hancock's Half Hour*, but we think more in terms of Les Dawson, Bernard Manning, and the drearier Shakespearean clowns. English produced no Rabelais.

That said, we have a pretty good next best in Robert Rankin, and though his form has always been somewhat uneven, *Apocalypso* (Corgi, £5.99) finds him at the top of it. This is his best-organized novel since *The Garden of Unearthly Delights*, though the embedded verses are not as good as the best in *A Dog Named Demolition*. Moreover, if you must create a joke by misattributing of one of Shaw's least salubrious cuts to either Churchill or Wilde, it's as well not to confuse the meanings of "exalt" and "exult."

The principal character, Padraig (pronounced Porrig) Naseby has the usual Rankin vices of slovenliness, fecklessness and cowardice combined with a habit of always saying whatever seems to need saying at the time – when it always proves to be the most comprehensively offensive possible in the circumstances. (Perhaps he should start reviewing kitsch horror novels.) This tends to land him

lumps now and again, but being a Rankin character he never learns – well, life's so much more fun if you don't learn from the learning experiences – and once he gets involved with a monstrous vegetable who thinks he's God (and has excellent supporting evidence), Carol Vorderman, the world's greatest collection of collectable comics, a transvestite who's beautiful and venal but useless in bed with either sex, an unusually well educated cannibal chief, an unusually direct experience of the Oedipus complex (Heinlein would not be amused) and a few other scrapes, the lumps land thick, fast and (this being comedy, after all) endurable.

Others beside myself (and including himself) have commented on Rankin's aplomb with old jokes, and this time the jokes are not only among the world's oldest, but highly concentrated in type. This book might well have been subtitled *A Retrospect of the Bodily Functions and Associated Fluids*, but the timing is so good, and the element of surprise so frequently and improbably present, that they almost all work. People have sometimes speculated about genetic modifications of coffee, rosemary or cigar tobacco that would actually taste as good as they smelt; I'm not holding my breath, but Rankin has, in sober truth, produced a compendium of schoolboy smut which is as funny as schoolboys think. Recommended to all smutty schoolboys and dirty old men, but especially to the glorious, dedicated few who have contrived to sustain a multi-decade overlap of those conditions.

Something inside us all tells us that the underground system ought to conceal the entry to a world of romantic but malevolent magic. No one so far has equalled John Collier's brilliant "Halfway to Hell," but the idea has staying power; it's the backbone of the children's "Harry Potter" series, and coincidentally provides Rankin's book with a joke or two, but was seized upon most notably by Polikarpus and King in *Down Town* and in Neil Gaiman's TV series *Neverwhere*. Lisa Goldstein, in *Dark Cities Underground* (Tor, \$22.95), has combined it with the idea that the logic which governs the worlds of fairy tale and controls the

idiosyncratic inhabitants thereof, may (sometimes anyway) be a slightly garbled but still decodeable description of how those worlds work.

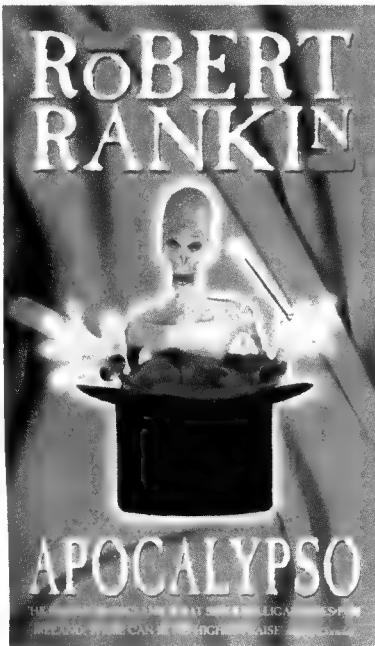
Well enough, but how to go there and check it out? Moreover, who will turn out to have been there before you? Those questions were addressed to excellent effect by Alexander Glass in "The Mirror Repair'd" (*Interzone* 139), but I have to say at once that Goldstein is nothing like so good a writer. None of the scenes in the unimaginatively named world of Neverwas has much of a flesh-creep factor, mainly I think because Goldstein is too immersed in her literary, mythological and alchemical references to be much concerned with atmosphere.

Nonetheless, her central conceit is interesting. The Underworld is an archetypal world, a dumping-ground for gods and demons of all past pantheons, and it's getting crowded. There's only so much numen to go round, and the deracinated older gods are getting feeble. To sustain a rear-guard action against the erosion of the new, they enact the ancient rituals of blood sacrifice ever more frequently – and they're hard on unwary intruders into their realm, for the good reason that those who come down too often or stay down too long are likely to become archetypes themselves – and who needs competition?

Thither come Sarah, a lawyer whose husband has been bloodily sacrificed; Ruthie, a hack journalist in search of a human-interest story; and Jeremy, who has been to Neverwas before and is the object of Ruthie's investigations. Jeremy was very young at the time, and the trauma of the experience has expunged most of it, but Ruthie's probing opens a door in his mind, and that opens a gate. It's not the only gate, by any means – Sattermole (who's especially malevolent, even for a redundant god) makes frequent transit – so the scene is set for the usual game of chase-and-learn-the-rules.

The construction is tight, and the internal logic not too loose, but the story lacks edge, especially in the early chapters where Goldstein feels compelled to report every jot of banal or phatic conversation between characters who have yet to get to know each other. Many of the archetypes are no less tedious – as one might expect of personalities monolithic by definition, but that's no excuse for recording the tedium at such length. Even worse, Goldstein has no eye for visual detail; at a point near the end Ruthie receives a postcard of some importance, and we're told it's a sepia print – but not what is depicted. It's not germane to the story, you see; or to put it another way, the book is without art.

Chris Gilmore



In 1871 Walt Whitman wrote a poem called "Passage to India," from which E. M. Forster was to take the title of his famous novel. Celebrating the construction of the Suez Canal, Whitman prophesied that science and technology would lead humanity into a glorious future. It would not, however, be a godless future. At a time when many feared the death of religion, Whitman claimed that science heralded a new spiritual age. As we uncovered the secrets of the universe, in truth we were all on a "passage to India," or rather to the mysteries and wonders symbolized by India. It was a species of pronouncement of which Stephen Hawking's "Then we would know the mind of God" is the most famous modern example.

It is doubtful that Greg Egan sees much common ground between religion and science, or would endorse the view of India that Whitman implies – so one surmises, at least, from Egan's gripping and provocative new novel, *Teranesia* (Gollancz, £16.99 hc; £9.99 trade pb). India, though it never appears directly, looms large in the novel, and the clash between religion and science is its central, though not overt subject.

The year is 2012. On an otherwise deserted Indonesian island, Calcutta-born biologists Rajendra and Radha Suresh, accompanied only by their two small children, investigate a series of curious, seemingly inexplicable mutations that have appeared among the island's butterflies. Rajendra and Radha are leading lights in the Indian Rationalists Association, a real-life organization (with an unfortunate acronym) dedicated to ridding their country of its "mind-addling legacy of superstition" – all the groovily mystical, Beatles-meet-the-Maharishi stuff that we patronizing westerners of a certain age most love about India, in other words. Killjoys, or what?

In any case, nine-year-old Prabir Suresh is not wholly free from mystical delusions. Populating the island's lush beaches and jungles with "water men," "fire birds" and other fabulous creatures, it is Prabir, too, who gives it its unofficial name, "Teranesia," from the Greek *teras* – that is, "Monster Island." It's all a game to assuage his loneliness. Prabir is uncertain of his parents' love, secretly envious of his baby sister Madhusree, and worried that he will be soon be sent away to school.

He also lavishes much time on correspondences with strangers over the internet. To Eleanor, a grown woman in New York, he pretends to be his father, giving Rajendra's age and life story as his own. The correspondence soon becomes an embarrassing tangle, and Prabir feels guilty for, as he

## A Powerful Transcendentalism

Tom Arden

sees it, stealing his father's life. But his guilt has barely begun. Civil war breaks out in Indonesia, and the island is cut off from the outside world. Prabir's parents, as scientists, feel they are in no danger – but they have reckoned without Prabir. Just before the internet is blocked, the boy responds to Eleanor's concern with a cheerful reply in which, among other things, he quotes his father's remarks about the "corrupt Javanese empire," and his support for the revolutionaries. It is an act Prabir shall regret forever. Before the boy knows it, warplanes are overhead, bombs have killed his parents, and he must flee Teranesia, bearing the infant Madhusree across the sea in a small boat. In years to come, only the knowledge that he at least saved his sister – and must always protect her – shall hold Prabir back from suicide.

In literary terms, this early part of the novel is the most impressive. Egan renders childhood emotion with considerable power, and the saving of Madhusree – in which a desperate Prabir tells his sister it is all a game, and that their parents shall be waiting for them at the end of the voyage – is masterly.

The novel then jumps ahead in time, and changes in tone. We see Prabir and Madhusree in Canada, where they are taken in by their mother's cousin Amita and her partner Keith, a pair of trendy humanities academics – she with a Masters in "Diana Studies," he with a PhD in "X-Files Theory." This ghastly couple, the precise opposite of Rajendra and Radha, dramatically highlight the virtues of Prabir's dead parents – the virtues, in particular, of their rationalism.

Amita is the kind of feminist intellectual who dedicates herself to attacking masculine reason – "the

entire gendered megatext of technology and science" – and Keith her willing accomplice. He asks Prabir, "Have you ever wondered why computers are so hostile to women?"

"Hostile?" Prabir had some trouble deciding what Keith was likely to mean by this claim. Paranoid delusions of artificial intelligence weren't necessarily out of the question. "You mean... why do some men harass women on the net?"

Keith said, "Well, yes, but it goes far deeper than that. Amita's work not only reveals the fundamental reason for the problem, it offers a stunningly simple solution." He jabbed at the notepad with his finger. "Zero and one. Absence and presence. *And just look how they're drawn!* 'Zero' is female: the womb, the vagina. 'One' is male: unmistakably phallic. The woman is absent, marginalised, excluded. The man is present, dominant, imperious. This blatantly sexist coding underpins all modern digital technology! And then we ask ourselves why women find it an unwelcoming space!"

I would call this a brilliant parody, if I didn't suspect that Egan had lifted it from a real academic paper. There is a marvellous scene in which Amita addresses a public rally; I won't spoil it, merely observe that Egan makes splendid satirical use of that would-be killer construction, with which a certain sort of feminist prefaces any dubious assertion, *As a woman, I...* Another writer – say, Malcolm Bradbury – could build a whole book around a character such as Amita; one almost wishes that Egan had, too.

But soon we leave Amita behind. Madhusree, grown to adulthood, becomes a biologist like her parents; Prabir, for his part, is a repressed – though not entirely repressed – gay computer programmer, still concerned obsessively for his sister's safety. To Prabir, saving Madhusree is "the one good thing" he has done in his life. His worst horror is to imagine her back on Teranesia. But when reports come in of new mutations in the region – now involving many more species than butterflies – Madhusree jumps at the chance to join an expedition that will, in effect, carry on their parents' work. Prabir tries to stop her; when he fails, he pursues her – to her fury. But she hasn't got time to be angry for long. Soon both are caught up in the genetic mystery that has its epicentre in Teranesia. Prabir's fanciful name for the island was not, it seems, so fanciful after all – and Prabir, after 20 years, must lay to rest his own personal monsters.

In essence, *Teranesia* is a novel about the corrupting power of illusion – a power analogous, Egan implies, to that of the rapidly-replicating gene



that lies behind the mutations. In their rationalism, Prabir's parents may have seemed cold; but Prabir must ask whether his life-long

guilt has been – yes – rational, or a distortion of reality every bit as much as the mythical birds and beasts he thought he saw as a boy. In the end the mysterious gene, in its blind, senseless and endless replication, is seen by Egan as a symbol of life itself. It is also, in a paradoxical manner, the means by which Prabir comes to terms with life. "He was thankful not to believe in God, for then such a condition of things would be intolerable; one could reconcile oneself to existence only because it was meaningless." That's not Egan, but W. Somerset Maugham, in *Of Human Bondage* – but Egan, it seems, comes to much the same conclusion.

This is an exceptionally intelligent, challenging and rewarding book, but not a wholly successful one. The scientific *donnée*, when we finally understand it, possesses neither the clarity, the centrality, nor the dramatic impact we find in Egan's best stories; this is, just a little too often, the kind of science fiction in which one finds a disjunction between the science and the fiction. The life of the story lies in Prabir's emotional journey; when the biologists start banging on about "the quantum state of the protein" and "polynomial time" and "eigenstates" and "endonuclease" and "oligonucleotides" – as they do, at some length, just when the story is coming to its climax – there will be those among us who long for the days when scientists just poured coloured liquid from one test tube to another, or cried "Now, Igor, the storm is at its height!"

There is a related disjunction when Egan has to choose, as it were, between his characters and his ideas. The adult Prabir is never, perhaps, a particularly convincing gay man – and indeed there is something dispiriting in this "suicidal queer" theme, especially when it is projected 30 years into the future. Prabir is not a stereotype – he's too individual for that – but when he breaks off a sex scene with his recently-acquired boyfriend in order to discuss the biological meaning of homosexuality – complete with elaborate metaphors of oxbow lakes and the evolutionary machine – one sees that Egan is more interested in getting across this theory than in what a person like Prabir would really think or feel in the given circumstances. And yet, when Egan forgets his didactic impulse, he can write about his characters with real insight and power; the brother-sister relationship, for example, is particularly well done.

Egan's didacticism comes most to

the fore in his frequent contrasts between religion and science. To make this "clash of ideas" stuff really work – at least, within a quasi-realistic novel like this – I think you have to give credit to both sides, to allow the ideas to have it out with something like equal weight. Egan can never resist stacking the deck. When Prabir, upon meeting a homophobic Christian fundamentalist, thinks how corrupt this man's God must be, one can only applaud; but as Egan knows, there is much more to the religious, mystical leanings of humanity than this sort of debased, vicious stupidity.

The religious impulse is a form of imagination; as such, it is a fundamental human trait. Egan neither acknowledges the positive, creative side of this impulse – the impulse that enables him to write this novel – nor sees that the anti-science brigade might sometimes have a point. Those attitudes to science epitomized by William Wordsworth – "We murder to dissect" – may be sentimental, or just plain wrong, but there is more to be said for them than Egan will allow. Nor does he consider that science itself may be a form of faith, or a replacement for faith, and that scientific reason, for all its claims to objectivity, can veer suddenly and vertiginously into unreason. Egan reveals himself as a fine satirist; but Jonathan Swift, the greatest satirist in the English language, produced equally coruscating and hilarious attacks both on science ("A Voyage to Laputa," in *Gulliver's Travels*) and religion (the story of Peter, Martin and Jack, in *A Tale of a Tub*). From a broad enough perspective, or at least from Swift's, all human endeavours tend in the end towards the same absurdity.

Swift's *Tale of a Tub*, a bizarre ragbag of a work, also contains his celebrated "Digression Concerning Madness," in which he argues that madness is the source of all "great" human achievements, and that happiness lies only in "a perpetual possession of being well-deceived." Well, perhaps: Egan's line, by contrast, would seem to be that reason is the best hope we have; that life must be faced squarely, and illusions banished, before happiness is possible. Is this true? In the compelling and moving ending of this novel, Egan puts his case memorably and well. He also, inadvertently or not, scatters many a hint that he is not such a rationalist as he may at first appear. For my own part, I suspect that his rationalism masks a powerful transcendentalism, a belief in the transforming powers of science every bit as mystical as Arthur C. Clarke's – or, perhaps, Walt Whitman's.

Tom Arden

## The Heart Forecast

David Mathew

Every work of fiction is a partner, potentially; and at the beginning of the relationship, we make a heart forecast. Do we want to be with this person for the time it will take to discover the strengths, the foibles, the funny little ways? Short stories might be one-night stands, but novels are serious commitments. Will our hearts be in the same place – be the same shape, be the same taste – when the relationship is finally ending, some 200, 400, 900 pages later?

Frederik Pohl's *The Far Shore of Time* (Tor, \$23.95) is a book that you will want to take home to meet your parents: it's that good and wholesome. Time was when Pohl described his books as "cautionary literature" and much of his work – notably the collaboration with C. M. Kornbluth, *The Space Merchants* (1953) – manifests a powerful sense of social conscience. In a way, the new book is cautionary too: free of any sense of parochialism or abject moralizing, it's a fast-moving tale that does not contain a wasted word or thought. It is hymn to old-fashioned plotting; it's rather brilliant.

*The Far Shore of Time* is the third of a long-running series, which began with *The Other End of Time*, and continued in *The Siege of Eternity*; but it's not important to have read the earlier works. Having escaped one set of enemies, the narrator soon finds himself the captive of another set – a band of robots that resemble Christmas trees, who want to drain their new toy of information. He tries what he can to resist, but is punished for his efforts. He meets a representative (named Dopey) of the first set, who is also now a prisoner. An alliance is formed, before the man becomes acquainted with a creature for whom the Christmas trees are working; and the human is offered a way to get inside the minds of others, including

that of Dopey... This novel, from an undisputed heavyweight – a grandmaster – is a reminder that sf should not be complacent; a sense of fun can usually be present...

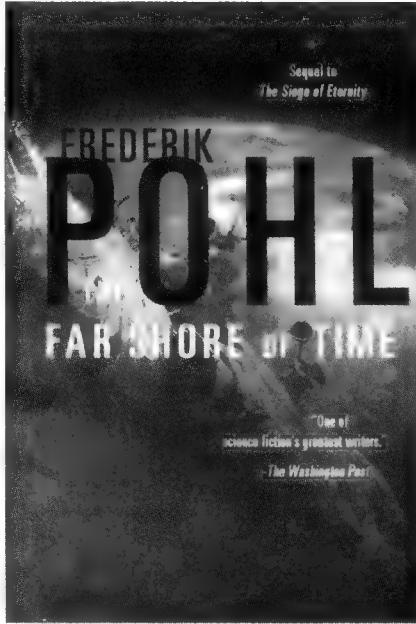
**R**egrets are like debts: it's impossible to slip through life without accruing one or two. "If I'd known then what I know now" is a chime we all hear; the question is not *if*, but rather *when*. For his latest novel, *Flashforward* (Tor, \$23.95), Robert J. Sawyer has used a variation on this notion: he's written a story in which the characters are forced to face the consequences of what will happen in the future, rather than what has passed.

The year is 2009. Not far from Geneva airport, an experiment concerning "the highest-energy particle collision in the history of this planet" takes place, with disastrous results. Everyone on Earth experiences the Flashforward: for less than two minutes the world's population sees what it will be doing two decades from the time of origin. Example: a couple of romantically-linked scientists witness scenes in which the other does not figure. Conclusion: either they will not get married, or they will get married and then divorced (the man is in bed with a wife he has yet to meet). Other characters see their futures full of children, or Jesus, or horror, or nothing at all.

A character who experiences the last of these options – a black-out – is determined to find out why. The answer, for anyone tuned in, is that he will no longer be alive in 20 years' time. On the Internet he requests information about his inevitable demise (talk about a death wish!), and receives a message, from someone who was reading the paper during the vision-time, that not only will he be dead; he will have been murdered. Will the murder be the consequence of professional jealousy (for the man will be eminent in his field)? Or perhaps he will have a role in the breakup of the lovers mentioned above; would such an intervention constitute a reasonable motive?

The company goes public with what it was up to at the time of the disaster, and of course there is hell to pay. The two minutes' fugue occurred when people were driving, or flying, or even walking. The death toll is astronomical, and the demise of the lead female character's daughter is poignantly done (she is hit by a car). Pressure mounts for the company to re-do the experiment, so that people might be given the chance to change their destinies; but the re-enactment is unsuccessful – the future cannot be second-guessed...

Part detective story, part (unwrit-



ten) episode of the old style of *The Twilight Zone*, *Flashforward* is riveting and a worthy addition to what might be called the Literature of Panic. Seeing the future might not be all that it's cracked up to be. Can time be tamed, or trained? Sawyer, as ever, parcels up his scientific knowledge, and deposits it understandably.

**W**ill Self writes better short stories than novels, and *Tough, Tough Toys for Tough, Tough Boys* (Penguin, £6.99) is one of his best collections. Self takes a scene from contemporary England – say the drug-dealing scene – and then injects it with fantasy. In "The Rock of Crack as Big as the Ritz" two brothers are dealing, first to lowlives and then to a better class of addict. One of the brothers (the one who doesn't touch the stuff) has discovered, in the cellar of the old family home, that the walls are made of crack. The other brother, meanwhile, who is into drugs, is ripping off profits and getting involved with a rich Iranian and his puddle-brained girlfriend. The descriptions of what crack does to the body are frightening and intoxicating.

In "Flytopia" a man, whose girlfriend is away, has a hatred for insects in his house; this state of mind soon changes, however, when the insects suggest a compromise and help him clean home and body. (Earwigs to clean your damper parts, anyone?) Insects, too, have feelings; and the man accepts they've got a right to occupy his property. He gives them the spare room, much to the girlfriend's alarm when she returns... "A Story for Europe" is a strange fable. A toddler is learning to speak, but his parents cannot understand what he's saying. Specialists

opine that there's nothing wrong with him; on the contrary, he's bright. It takes a German specialist to realize that little Humphrey is communicating in Business German, at the same time as a German businessman is losing his identity and becoming more and more childish.

"Dave Too" is a silly, thin tale that is nevertheless carried along by Self's clever prose. In it, everybody turns into a Dave. (If your name is David, or if you have a name that similarly causes heads to turn if it's called out in company, this story will raise a smile.) "Dave Too" seems to be about social homogeneity, the lack of identity. As is the title story, in which a hard-drinking, drug-smoking psychoanalyst picks up a hitchhiker. The analyst decides to play games – to get the hitchhiker to tell everything about himself; an ugly picture emerges. But the analyst starts to understand that the faults he despises in the hitchhiker are similar to his own (especially the dependency on mind-altering substances), and that a man, made solely of weaknesses, might amount to nothing – might vanish – if those weaknesses are directly addressed. And "Design Faults in the Volvo 760 Turbo: A Manual" will gratify anyone who has ever thought that a man who drives a flash sports car is regarding the machine as a penis-extension: "But when he pulls away he realizes – given that he has absolutely no justification for being in this part of London... – that the car is grotesquely elongated..."

The overelaboration that clogs up movement in Will Self's novels is blissfully absent in this collection. While intelligently regarding moral dilemmas and questions of personality, this volume is nevertheless a simple joy to read, and occasionally funny.

**I**n the winter of 1995, I spent three days in bed with a woman named Smilla. She was inside the pages of a novel, but what a rapturous affair it was. How intently I listened as Smilla whispered the story of her involvement in the case of a murdered child... *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* was a ground-breaking detective novel, and its author was a Dane called Peter Hoeg. Although it was not the first novel he wrote, it was the one that secured him an international reputation, and I, for one, have eagerly read his work ever since. The most recent offering (in English) is a collection of stories, originally published in 1990, and here translated (by his oft-times collaborator, Barbara Haveland) as *Tales of the Night* (Harvill, £6.99).





It is a marvel to behold. To read it is to rediscover the capacity for lateral thought; it reminds us of what we've been missing. For this reason alone (but also for others) it qualifies, I think, as a fantasy; but the collection is no closer to hard-and-fast "reality" than his other work. Hoeg often flirts with genre; and if the term had not already come to mean a particular type of (by and large) South American fiction, we might say that Hoeg worked within the forcefields of magic realism. He writes fiction in which the unbelievable is soon the commonplace; in which the scientific mates with the metaphysical. What set *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* above the rest of that year's thrillers (it was first published in England in 1993) was partly the deep philosophy that was imparted, but was also the junctures at which reality snapped. The rock in the polar waters, which might have fallen from space, and which might be "alive," is pure science fiction. Or in *Borderliners* (a novel in which children try to touch time), there's a scene where a boy studies a key in order to memorize it and then to reproduce it; which is utter tosh, of course, outside the novel's skin, but credible therein. And then there is *The Woman and the Ape*, Hoeg's most prolonged foray into the fantastic – a novel about a talking ape and the woman who loves him.

The stories in *Tales of the Night* take place on 19th March 1929, and are all connected by the theme of love and by nothing else. Their plots may be easy to summarize, but these are long short stories, of 40 or 50 pages each (apart from the shorter final story) – eight tales in 300 pages. The characters are thinkers and outsiders. In "Journey into a Dark Heart" (as the title might suggest), Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a starting point. A train trip from a point "near the mouth of the Congo, to Katanga in Central Africa" is symbolic of an arrival at self-discovery. Not Kurtz himself, but his creator, "Joseph K." (Korzeniowski) is on board, as is a recalcitrant German – and a native woman who informs the arguing party that when the train travels over a forthcoming bridge, it will plummet to the ground like a dart. Her allies have tampered with the bridge.

In "Homage to Bournonville," the art of ballet is examined and mixed with an examination into the energies of lust. A male dancer falls in love with his dancing partner, who is perfect, or apparently so; untouchable, apart from during their routines. So he listens to her stories (her mother was a prostitute, and the

daughter washed the soldiers before it was their turn), and adores her from a variety of "afar" that happens to be near. When he learns that he's been duped, he kills himself, but despite his condition, feels that there should be one final performance.

"The Verdict on the Right Honourable Ignatio Landstat Rasker, Lord Chief Justice" is a prickly set of stories-within-stories. An esteemed man of law falls in love with the man whom he is prosecuting for writing pornographic literature and for sex with a (male) minor. "An Experiment on the Constancy of Love" sees a physicist attempting to reproduce love's forces by tapping into the past. Her contention is that the room in

which powerfully amorous poetry was once composed must hold some of the echoes and vibrations, years later.

In interview, Peter Hoeg once said that while writing he did not think in pictures; that the words were meant to connect at levels in the reader's brain that did not pertain to the visual. And it's easy to see what he might have meant when we read a masterpiece like *Tales of the Night*. Regardless of the style he employs (and Hoeg is always in the right prose at the right time), the tale speaks directly to a place inside the reader that is rarely reached. The heart forecast that is made at the beginning of his work is seldom inaccurate.

David Mathew

## Dark Fantastic

Peter Crowther

**Indigo** (Michael Joseph, £9.99), continues Graham Joyce's progress through a literary sub-genre that is at once completely mainstream but which at the same time bears all the trademarks of more easily identifiable and recognizable dark fantastic fiction.

The story centres on Jack Chambers, a young process-server who is sent to Rome as executor of his father's Estate. Jack never got on very well with his father and so the late gentleman's decision to make his son's only involvement that of a manager rather than a beneficiary causes him neither surprise nor concern. That is until he discovers a rather unusual clause in the will, namely to arrange for the publication of his father's manuscript – a kind of treatise-cum-guidebook on the art of becoming invisible, a skill made possible by recognizing and mastering the colour indigo... which can be found in only two places (aside from the poles): Rome and Chicago. But finding it is only part of the solution, and the emergence of a sense-depriving virtual reality headset is by no means the most bizarre nor the most disturbing additional requirement.

The introduction of Jack's half-sister Louise and an eccentric sensual woman who was the elder Chambers's former lover – to both of whom Jack is irresistibly attracted – combine with the strangeness and beauty of Rome, the City of the Wolf, to pull him deeper and deeper into a maelstrom of intrigue, passion and, ultimately, horror as he struggles to

make sense of the increasingly metaphysical manuscript and the elusive colour upon which everything seems to hinge.

It's work of this quality and scope – despite (or maybe even because of) *Indigo*'s ability to sit with equal comfort on the mainstream literary shelves and in the horror section – that will carry the beleaguered horror genre forward to new heights. So fresh and so intriguing, so full of characterization and so bereft of the clichés that have, from time to time, dogged the field.

**I**magine a world in which God comes up to your cafeteria table and presents you with photographs of yourself from your past – depicting events you *know* never happened; or where your dog suddenly turns around and engages you in deep philosophical discussion; or in which Death assumes different disguises and follows you around removing people from your life for no other reason than "his" own capricious entertainment. It's a strange place – ask Jonathan Carroll: he lives there all the time.

His new novel, **The Marriage of Sticks** (Gollancz, £16.99), begins in characteristic fashion. Returning to her class reunion after 15 years, Miranda Romanac is saddened to learn of the death of her high school sweetheart, James Stillman, a man who has continued to represent the ideals of her youth. Shortly afterwards she meets the extraordinary and fabulously eccentric (and old!) *interzone*

Frances Hatch, mistress of many of the great artists in Paris in the 1920s; embarks on an affair with Hugh Oakley, a married art dealer; and sees James Stillman again, waving to her across a busy street.

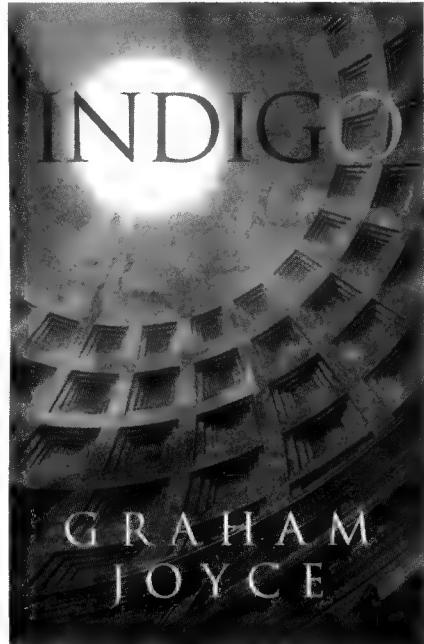
Soon, the dependable security of what she knows to be real is unravelled from Miranda's world until her life itself, complete with all of its myriad memories and her very identity, is revealed to her – from people both living and

dead and from "ghosts" of people from her many alternate futures – to be but a single ripple on pond of enormous size. Then she must make a decision, a sacrifice of sorts, which, in bringing a kind of redemption, will have huge implications not only for herself, but also for the many people that surround her and that she has known down the years.

The title of the book comes from the idea of, whenever anything important happens to you, finding a stick in the immediate vicinity and writing the occasion and date on it. Then, over the years, keep sorting out that collection so that only the *absolute* most important occasions are so "immortalized" until... "when you're old and sick, or sure there's not much time left to live, put them together and burn them. The marriage of sticks."

Quite why the novel didn't entirely work for me is hard to say. Possibly it's Carroll's decision to make the narrative first-person (Miranda), though I never consciously felt that it was a man's voice masquerading as a woman's; possibly, too, it's due in part to the long opening section of scene-setting – more than half of the book's 282 pages – leading to a single event that is to throw Miranda's life into complete turmoil; and possibly it's the complex and somewhat elongated denouement, effectively a treatise on immortality and the myriad possibilities afforded by even the simplest and seemingly insignificant of choices.

Whatever, while it may not be *vintage* Carroll, *The Marriage of Sticks* contains an abundance of the *bon mots* and quiet truths – not to mention the gently rolling prose that you just *know* is leading to a major smack in the face – that so typify the author's work. And, in this book per-



haps more than any of his others, he manages wonderfully to capture the scary notion that we take far too much for granted... and that the slightest deviation can have drastic consequences.

"Just the smallest twist of the dial away from normal – one click – and everything we know for certain vanishes," Hugh explains to Miranda one day. "There's a vase in the office we've had for years, a nice Lalique piece. But someone knocked it over or

whatever. When I saw it like that today, on its side, it was unrecognizable. I couldn't tell what the thing was. I stood in the hall glued to the spot, wondering, What the hell is that? Then Courtney walked up, righted it, and there is was again – the vase."

An essential buy, then, for Carroll fans while newcomers to the author's work would be well-advised to start in the (relatively speaking) shallow end of some of his earlier novels before wading down to this.

It's ten years since, with an expression of incredulity, Michael Marshall Smith picked up the British Fantasy Award double-header of Best Short Story (for "The Man Who Drew Cats," from 1988's *Dark Voices 2* and which still resonates with influences of the best of

Stephen King) and Best Newcomer.

Since then, of course, Smith has stepped up to the podium on several more occasions and always with the same bemused air befitting any writer receiving accolades for their work. And why not. Writers spend such lengths of time alone, scribbling, before sending their creations off to the waiting world convincing themselves that nobody's going to like *this* one. It's only when all the works are arranged

together in some kind of display that one – be he reader or creator – is able to say, yes, I can see what the fuss is all about. With the publication of *What You Make It* (HarperCollins, £12.99), Smith's first short-story collection, the reason for all that fuss is very plain to see.

All the favourites are here: "More Tomorrow," the shockingly and despairingly horrific tale of internet abuse from *Dark Terrors*; "The Dark Land," the surreal *coup de grace* of Nick Royle's *Darklands*; "The Owner," Smith's brooding and claustrophobic tale from my own *Touch Wood*; and the remarkable and cautionary novella of science gone mad, "Hell Hath Enlarged Herself" from *Dark Terrors 2*. But, for me, the best story is one that has not appeared before – indeed, it's one that Smith admits to having written purely for himself and without thought for commercial sale. "When God Lived in Kentish Town" is a wonderful and almost fairy-tale account of a brief spell when God seemed to have taken over a small shop in a London suburb: it's a story of quiet hope that could have graced any anthology or magazine and boosted it several rungs up the ladder of credibility and inventiveness.

With work of this towering and eclectic standard, Smith has secured his position as one of our foremost practitioners of the short form... in any genre.

Writing to novella-length – around 20-40,000 words – is a difficult and demanding task but one which carries perhaps more inherent promise of success than either the short story (less than 10,000) or the novel (say 70,000 words minimum) formats. The constraints of the former

often cause writers to emasculate plot progression and short-change character development, while achieving the latter can lead to excessive padding. The novella, meanwhile, can be the best of both worlds... but only when it's done well.

Two fine examples of (a) how it should be done and (b) how it should *not* be done can be found in Cemetery Dance Publications' recent Novella Series (all titles priced at \$30).

The less said about William F.



JONATHAN CARROLL



Nolan's *The Winchester Horror* the better, quite frankly. The story, such as it is, revolves around a reputedly haunted house into which David Kincaid, an investigator of the paranormal, must venture to find a missing woman.

Hammy, turgid and slight – and it would have been all of these even half a century ago, when the pulp magazines thrived – the book is not helped by Nolan's decision to write certain sections of an otherwise first-person narrative in third-person (namely those sections in which he needs to have someone brutally murdered in the house while the narrator is elsewhere) nor even by the author's afterword wherein he reveals that not only are most of the events described based on fact (he visited the house himself) but the protagonist too is based on a real person. There can be no doubt that the Winchester House is a fascinating place but those wanting to read a classic piece of fiction set around it should dig out the old issue of DC Comics' *Swamp Thing* when Alan Moore was at the authorial helm.

Ray Garton's **411**, however, is a different thing entirely. Scripted as tightly as a drum, the story introduces us to a young woman who works as a 411 information operator – like Britain's 192 directory-enquiries operation. Paralysed from the waist down as a result of a tragic car accident, Kaitlin still suffers from nightmares of the crash but, after two years, she's starting to rebuild her life. And then she gets a call from a young man wanting the number of the pizza delivery service nearest to his mother's house, where he's visiting. As Kaitlin is explaining the choices available, she hears noises from somewhere in the caller's house. While Kaitlin waits, listening, the caller, using a cordless phone, moves through the house calling to see if his mother is okay. Then there is another noise, cutting the young man off in mid-sentence, and a clatter. Kaitlin asks repeatedly if everything is okay and then another voice comes on the line and asks who she is. Kaitlin explains she's a 411 operator and then makes the mistake of giving the man her name – her real name and not the dummy name they're trained to use – whereupon the man hangs up.

The news reports a double murder – a young man and his mother – around the area where the caller said his mother lived. Kaitlin believes she has been the only witness to a double murder... but nobody believes her. Of course, she's not even sure whether any information she might provide would be helpful... but she soon discovers that there's someone out there who is

not going to take that chance. What follows is a classic and beautifully-executed update on Hitchcock's *Rear Window* meets Brian Clemens's *Blind Terror* (US title *See No Evil*) with as neat (and audacious!) an ending as you're likely to find for some time.

**E**qually neat and certainly as audacious is Stephen King's wonderful "LT's Theory of Pets," a short story, recently released on audio cassette only – read by the author – as part of a package also containing King's interview appearance last year at the Royal Festival Hall, *Stephen King Live!* (Hodder Headline Audio-books, £8.99). This is a superb job marred only by the publisher's decision to put it out on two cassettes when the running time is a mere 90 minutes. But the high quality of the contents, not to mention the recording, makes forgiveness swift. Whether you made it to the event or not, this is an essential purchase for King collectors.

Not quite so essential a purchase, no matter how big a fan of Clive Barker you are, is *Being Music*, a compilation CD of music chosen by Barker and released as part of EMI's admittedly beautifully-packaged "Songbook" series (priced around £14.99) which also includes selections chosen by the likes of Iain Banks, Gilbert Shelton and Robert Crumb. The stitched-in full-colour booklet features Barker's typically disturbing and distressing drawings and paintings, with little explanations as to why the author chose the featured tracks as "inspiration" for his work. If you need one disc which includes Judy Garland's "Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas," Danny Elfman's "Carnival Underground" (from the *Nightbreed* movie soundtrack) and Rachmaninov's "Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor" then look no further.

Otherwise, fans of really strange music should rush out and buy a copy of Tom Waits's *Mule Variations* (Epic-taph, around £13.99), which, in "What's He Building In There," provides one of



the year's most quietly disturbing but gentle horror stories masquerading – as only Waits can do so wonderfully and so effectively – as music.

**F**or anyone who has loved or *does* love another, the anguish of *When the Feast is Finished* (Little, Brown, £16.99), Brian Aldiss's memoir of his final days with his terminally-ill wife, Margaret, is almost too much to take. But, by the same ruling, it is impossible – *truly* impossible – to put down...

Complemented by extracts from the diaries kept by Aldiss and his wife – and interspersed with snippets of what was happening in Aldiss's career at the time – the narrative is an unmissable and gloriously honest read. And while, when the final page has been turned, the word "harrowing" occurs immediately as a single-word summation of the book, it is almost as immediately discounted.

"Harrowing" is something we tend to use, for example, in reference to stories from the Nazi abominations of World War II and there is nothing here, in this heart-rending account of a fine woman taking her leave of life and family, that smacks of such atrocities. Rather it is gentle and inevitable, a winding down recalled with all the hopes and tears, and all the fortitude and exhaustion, that must accompany such a traumatic event.

There will be those who consider the act of recording virtually every day of Margaret Aldiss's death sentence to be one of bravery – as indeed Sandol Stoddard, the leading advocate of the Hospice Movement, suggests in his succinct and unsanctimonious introduction. Possibly so. But while the story, with its inescapable conclusion, may be of some worth to others faced with either of the two central roles of patient and carer (for misery does, indeed, love company), I would imagine the real value of the book is to Aldiss himself inasmuch as it might enable him to draw some kind of line and exorcise much of the pain... or, at least, to put it into a context of sorts. I sincerely hope that is the case.

But to say it is of no worth at all to others would be a gross injustice. In fact, I would recommend it to a far wider readership than merely those suffering from terminal illness or their carers. *When the Feast is Finished* serves as a timely reminder to anyone taking the time to read it – and the prose is characteristically excellent and amazingly devoid of rant – to take stock of what you have and to take time out to enjoy it. If this book makes just one person do that even to the smallest degree then it will have been worth ten times over all of the effort and pain that went into its writing.

Peter Crowther

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Baxter, Stephen, and others. **Web 2027**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-599-0, 568pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf omnibus, first edition; it contains six short novels in the "Web" series, originally published as children's books but here seemingly repackaged for adults: *Gulliverzone* by Baxter [1997], *Dreamcastle* by Stephen Bowkett [1997], *Untouchable* by Eric Brown [1997], *Spiderbite* by Graham Joyce [1997], *Lightstorm* by Peter F. Hamilton [1998], and *Sorceress* by Maggie Furey [1998]; there is a definite article in the book's title as given on the cover, but it's not so on the title page [where it counts]; reviewed, briefly, by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 146.) June 1999.

Bear, Greg. **Foundation and Chaos**. "The Second Foundation Trilogy. Authorised by the Estate of Isaac Asimov." Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-736-6, 438pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf sharecrop novel, first published in the USA, 1998; it's set in the universe of Asimov's "Foundation" stories and is the second of a trilogy being written by separate hands: the other volumes are Gregory Benford's *Foundation's Fear*, 1997, and the book by David Brin listed below.) 15th July 1999.

Betancourt, John Gregory. **Infection: Double Helix, Book One of Six**. "Star Trek: The Next Generation, #51." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-03255-0, 226pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1999; this is the American first edition of June 1999 with a British price added; it's based on a "concept" by John J. Ordover and Michael Jan Friedman.) 5th July 1999.

Bethke, Bruce. **Wild Wild West**. Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-1777-1, 247pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Historical fantasy-comedy movie novelization, first published in the USA, 1999; based on a screenplay by S. S. Wilson and others, based on a story by Jim and John Thomas, based on a 1960s TV series.) 23rd July 1999.

Borchardt, Alice. **Night of the Wolf**. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-42362-3, 454pp, hardcover, £25. (Historical horror/romantic novel, first edition; proof copy received; follow-up to *The Silver Wolf*; the author is the sister of bestselling novelist Anne Rice.) August 1999.

Boucher, Anthony. **The Compleat Boucher: The Complete Short Science Fiction and Fantasy of Anthony Boucher**. Edited by James A. Mann. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA

01701-0809, USA], ISBN 1-886778-02-7, viii+531pp, hardcover, cover by Jane Dennis, \$25. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; it contains all Boucher's sf and fantasy stories, including several previously uncollected and one, "Rappaccini's Other Daughter," which was previously unpublished anywhere; "Anthony Boucher" was a pseudonym of William Anthony Parker White [1911-1968], crime novelist, critic, and co-founder of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*; another very worthwhile NESFA volume – recommended.) No date shown: received in June 1999.

Bradley, David. **The Deep Field**. Sceptre, ISBN 0-7336-0875-2, 414pp, hardcover, no price shown. (Sf [or quasi-sf] novel, first edition; this is a near-future-set second novel by a new Australian writer [born 1967], published by Hodder Headline's Australian division [his first, which we did not see, was called *Wrack*]; it has been sent to us by Headline UK, who are planning a trade paperback edition for the British market, under their "Review" imprint, priced at £9.99 and to be released on 29th July 1999; it's pitched at the literary mainstream, written mainly in the present tense, with no quote marks around the dialogue.) No date shown: received in June 1999.

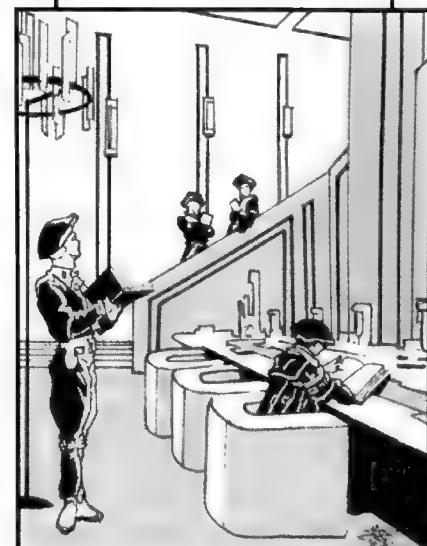
Brin, David. **Foundation's Triumph**. "The Second Foundation Trilogy. Authorised by the Estate of Isaac Asimov." Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-753-6, 328pp, hardcover, cover by Fred Gambino, £16.99. (Sf sharecrop novel, first published in the USA [?], 1999; third of a trilogy written by separate hands: the other volumes are Gregory Benford's *Foundation's Fear*, 1997, and the book by Greg Bear listed above.) 15th July 1999.

Byrne, Eugene. **ThiGMOO**. Earthlight, 0-671-02862-6, 345pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Humorous sf novel, first edition; a debut book by an *Interzone* writer; the original short-story version, "Thigmoo," appeared in *Iz* 120; recommended.) No date shown: received in June 1999.

Cady, Jack. **The American Writer: Shaping a Nation's Mind**. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-20274-1, 356pp, hardcover, \$26.95. (Critical study of American writing by a U.S. author who has himself written horror fiction; first edition; proof copy received; according to the accompanying publisher's letter, "This book is basically an open letter to young would-be writers about the American tradition of literature, but its focus isn't on the craft of writing – it's on the art and matter of American fiction, including some very interesting thoughts on the literature of the fantastic, particularly on magic realism.") October 1999.

Carey, Diane. **What You Leave Behind**. "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-03476-6, 212pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series novelization, first published in the USA, 1999; this is the Ameri-

## BOOKS RECEIVED



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can first edition of June 1999 with a British price added; it's based on an episode [the final one in the *Deep Space Nine* series, in fact] scripted by Ira Steven Behr and Hans Beimler.) 6th July 1999.

Carroll, Jonathan. **Kissing the Beehive**. Vista, ISBN 0-575-60281-3, 251pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1998; it seems Orion are retaining the old Gollancz imprint name of Vista for some of their "quality" paperbacks; reviewed by Pete Crowther in *Interzone* 132.) 10th June 1999.

Cartmel, Andrew. **The Wise**. "Virgin Worlds." Virgin, ISBN 0-7535-0373-5, 471pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf/horror novel, first edition; the author has previously written "Doctor Who" novels and has worked as a script editor for BBC Television; this book comes with back-cover commendations from Stephen Gallagher and Peter O'Donnell.) 16th July 1999.

Case, David. **Brotherly Love, and Other Tales of Trust and Knowledge**. Introduction by Ramsey Campbell. Pumpkin Books [PO Box 297, Nottingham NG2 4GW], ISBN 1-901914-12-7, x+276pp, hardcover, cover by Les Edwards, £16.99. (Horror collection, first edition; the publishers perform the sort of service here which small presses are particularly good at – bringing together samples of work by an author who has fallen into neglect; Case [born 1937] was known decades ago for such books as *The Cell: Three Tales of Horror* [1969] and *Fengriffen and Other Stories* [1971], both long out of print; this new

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volume contains a short novel, "The Terrestrial Fancy" [just over 100 pages long, and sf] and five short stories; there are no credits for previous publication, so presumably all are original to this book.) Late entry: *May publication, received in June 1999.*

**Cave, Hugh B. Isle of the Whisperers.** Illustrated by John Coulthart. Pumpkin Books, ISBN 1-901914-15-1, 265pp, hardcover, cover by Coulthart, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; Hugh B. Cave is a much older writer than David Case [above]; born 1910, and now approaching 90 years of age, he was a contributor to the U.S. pulp magazines from 1929 onwards; he is best remembered for the collection *Murgunstrumm and Others* [1977], although he wrote a number of novels in the 1980s; it's good to know he is still writing, after a career almost as long as the legendary Jack Williamson's.) Late entry: *May publication, received in June 1999.*

**Chalker, Jack L. Priam's Lens.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-40294-4, 422pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first edition; this appears to be a new stand-alone novel by Chalker, not part of one of his many series.) Late entry: *1st May publication, received in June 1999.*

**Cisco, Michael. The Divinity Student.** Illustrated by Harry O. Morris. Buzzcity Press [PO Box 38190, Tallahassee, FL 32315, USA], ISBN 0-9652200-1-X, 149pp, trade paperback, cover by Morris, \$12.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; a nicely-produced debut book by a new American writer [born 1970], it has cover commendations by Paul Di Filippo and Thomas Ligotti.) *1st June 1999.*

**Clement, Hal. Half a Life.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86920-7, 252pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's described as "the first new hard sf novel in a decade from the master of the form.") *September 1999.*

**Constantine, Storm. The Thorn Boy.** Introduction by Poppy Z. Brite. Eidolon Publications [PO Box 225, North Perth, WA 6906, Australia], ISBN 0-9586864-3-2, vii+108pp, small-press paperback, cover by Rick Berry, \$A11.95. (Fantasy novella, first edition; this says something for the internationalism of the small press: a new short novel by a British writer has been published in Australia [in a very nicely produced edition] and sent to us for review by an American distributor! – it's available in the USA at \$12.95 from Firebird Distributing, 2030 First St., Unit 5, Eureka, CA 95501 – e-mail: sales@firebirddistributing.com.) No date shown: received in June 1999.

**Cortiel, Jeanne. Demand My Writing: Joanna Russ/Feminism/Science Fiction.** "Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies, 18." Liverpool University Press, ISBN 0-85323-624-0, vi+254pp, C-format paperback, £15.95. (Critical study of a major American sf writer, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at

£32 [not seen]; Joanna Russ, who had a large presence in the 1970s, seems to have been rather silent of late [although we may have missed a book or two of hers published in the UK by Women's Press, who no longer seem to send us review copies]; this detailed study, written by an academic who teaches in Germany, comes with commendations by Marleen Barr, Samuel R. Delany and others.) Late entry: *May publication, received in June 1999.*

**Crowther, Peter, and James Lovegrove. The Hand That Feeds.** Maynard Sims Productions [1 Gibbs Field, Bishops Stortford, Herts. CM23 4EY], ISBN 1-9536066-0-0, 64pp, small-press paperback, £5. (Horror novella, first edition; a new long story in saddle-stitched booklet form, from the publishers of the magazine *Enigmatic Tales*; see also the more lavishly-produced James Lovegrove novella from PS Publishing, below.) No date shown: *received in June 1999.*

**Eddings, David. The Tamuli.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648384-4, 470+472+487pp, B-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £12.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first edition [?]; it consists of the trilogy *Domes of Fire* [1992], *The Shining Ones* [1993] and *The Hidden City* [1994] – in all, making up a tome of nearly 1,500 pages.) *5th July 1999.*

**Eddings, David and Leigh. The Rivan Codex: Ancient Texts of The Belgariad and The Malloreon.** Illustrated by Geoff Taylor. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648349-6, 490pp, A-format paperback, cover by Taylor, £6.99. (Illustrated companion to the Eddings' various fantasy series, first published in the UK, 1998; it consists of a short "autobiography" of the character Belgarath the Sorcerer, together with various "holy books," "histories," "gospels" and other matter pertaining to his imaginary world.) *5th July 1999.*

**Fowler, Christopher. Uncut: Twenty-One Short Stories.** Warner, ISBN 0-7515-2644-4, viii+406pp, trade paperback, cover by Jay Eff, £7.99. (Horror collection, first edition; this is a sort of "best of Christopher Fowler," re-permutating stories from his earlier collections together with some newer ones; he is a surprisingly prolific short-story writer, considering his work rarely seems to appear in magazines [not ones we see, at any rate]; he tells us he chose these 21 tales from a total output of nearly 80.) *15th July 1999.*

**Furey, Maggie. The Heart of Myrial: Book One of The Shadowleague.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-751-X, 438pp, hardcover, cover by Mick Van Houten, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) *22nd July 1999.*

**Garfinkle, Richard. All of an Instant.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86617-8, 383pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a second novel by the author of *Celestial Matters* [1996], which gained general praise; it involves time travel.) *November 1999.*

**Goonan, Kathleen Ann. Mississippi Blues.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86893-6, 511pp, trade paperback, \$15.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997; sequel to the author's highly-praised debut novel, *Queen City Jazz* [1994]; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 128.) *June 1999.*

**Hambly, Barbara. Dragonshadow.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648368-2, 297pp, A-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; follow-up to *Dragonsbane*.) *21st June 1999.*

**Houghton, Gordon. The Apprentice.** Anchor, ISBN 1-862-30036-4, 302pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; the apprentice of the title gets a job working for Death – everybody, inevitably, is going to liken this book to Terry Pratchett's *Mort*; it's a second novel by a new British writer, born 1965; his first, presumably not a fantasy, was called *The Dinner Party*, and both have been published by Transworld in their "Anchor" snob-back line.) *22nd July 1999.*

**Jacoby, Kate. Exile's Return: First Book of Elita.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-878-7, 442pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1998; the author is Australian, and the book is copyrighted in the name of Tracey Oliphant.) *June 1999.*

**Jensen, Jane. Millennium Rising.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-43034-4, ix+430pp, hardcover, \$24. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this near-future thriller is a debut novel by a new American writer who has worked in computer-games software; the proof contains a ten-page interview with her at the rear, but it's unlikely this will be included in the finished book; Del Rey seem to be giving it a major publicity push.) *October 1999.*

**Jones, Stephen, ed. White of the Moon: New Tales of Madness and Dread.** Pumpkin Books, ISBN 1-901914-13-5, x+339pp, hardcover, cover by Les Edwards, £16.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; this follow-up to last year's Jones/Pumpkin anthology, *Dark of the Night*, contains all-new stories by Ramsey Campbell, Ed Bryant, Christopher Fowler, Terry Lamsley, Joel Lane, Paul J. McAuley, Graham Masterton, Kim Newman, Kathryn Ptacek, Nicholas Royle, David J. Schow, Michael Marshall Smith, Brian Stableford and Jeff VanderMeer, among others; it looks like another strong entry.) Late entry: *May publication, received in June 1999.*

**Joyce, Graham. Leningrad Nights.** Introduction by Peter Straub. PS Publishing [98 High Ash Drive, Leeds LS17 8RE], ISBN 1-902880-03-X, 48pp, hardcover, £25. (Horror novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous paperback edition priced at £8; all copies are signed by the author; the print is fairly small, so there is perhaps more

wordage here than the page count suggests.) No date shown: received in June 1999.

Kerr, Katharine. **The Black Raven: Book Two of The Dragon Mage.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224644-9, 323pp, hardcover, cover by Geoff Taylor, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1999; follow-up to *The Red Wyvern*, and second in a new quintet of the "Deverry" sequence.) 19th July 1999.

Ketchum, Jack. **Off Season: The Unexpurgated Edition.** Introduction by Douglas E. Winter. Overlook Connection Press, ISBN 1-892950-10-3, vii+211pp, hardcover, cover by Neal McPhee, \$45. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1980; proof copy received; a limited edition, signed by the author, introducer and cover artist; "Jack Ketchum" is a pseudonym of Dallas Mayr, and this was his debut novel; it suffered cuts in its first [Ballantine Books] edition, and the text has now been restored; it's strong meat, about cannibalism and such.) 16th August 1999.

Laymon, Richard. **Come Out Tonight.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-2051-4, 311pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition [?]; apart from Neil Gaiman's *Stardust*, which enjoyed a special publicity push, this [along with the paperback by Laymon below] is the first Headline book we have been sent in quite some time; but they still churn them out: titles we have missed in recent months include *Our Lady of the Snow* by Louise Cooper, *Dead Cold: A Psychic Thriller* by Uri Geller, *Wildwood* by Frances Gordon, *Seize the Night* by Dean Koontz, *Among the Missing* by Richard Laymon, *Vespers* by Jeff Rovin, and *Caddoran* by Roger Taylor – and a relevant non-fiction book, *Dean Koontz: A Writer's Biography* by Katherine Ramsland; our thanks to Ian Covell for the information on Headline's under-publicized output.) 22nd July 1999.

Laymon, Richard. **The Midnight Tour.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-5827-9, 538pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £5.99 (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1998; on the back cover it's described as the third of "The Beast House Chronicles," following *The Cellar* and *The Beast House*.) 22nd July 1999.

Long, Jeff. **The Descent.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06862-0, 470pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA [?], 1999; proof copy received; Jeff Long has written three previous mountaineering thrillers; this one, which opens in the Himalayas and involves the discovery of some sort of underground realm there, is being given lots of publicity push and is described in the accompanying publicity blurb as "in the tradition of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells... an epic adventure through fantastic landscapes, among creatures for whom man is both god and meat"; the author is presumably British – you can tell by the heavy use of "said-bookisms" in the dialogue lines [something which Ameri-

can authors, even on the galumphing best-seller level, usually avoid]: "Gibberish," snapped Owen, badly spooked. 'Bible talk,' Ike sympathized. 'No it's not,' piped up Kora.") 23rd September 1999.

Lovegrove, J. M. H. **Berserker: The Guardians, Book 2.** "Sci-Fi Channel." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-556-7, 407pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; by the not-so-subtle device of using only his initials, James Lovegrove signals to us all that this is a paperback-original quickie, not to be taken too seriously; the imprimatur of the Sci-Fi Channel seems to indicate that too.) June 1999.

Lovegrove, James. **How the Other Half Lives.** Introduction by Colin Greenland. PS Publishing [98 High Ash Drive, Leeds LS17 8RE], ISBN 1-902880-01-3, 46pp, hardcover, £25. (Horror novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous paperback edition priced at £8; all copies are signed by the author; the print is fairly small, so there is perhaps more wordage here than the page count suggests.) No date shown: received in June 1999.

McCarthy, Wil. **Bloom.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-593-1, 310pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 138.) June 1999.

McDonald, Ian. **Kirinya.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-876-0, 412pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mike Posen, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1998; sequel to *Chaga* [1995]; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 134.) June 1999.

Meisler, Andy. **Resist or Serve: The Official Guide to The X-Files.** "Volume 4." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-257133-1, 288pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Heavily illustrated and very detailed episode guide to the fifth season of the sf/horror TV series created by Chris Carter; first published in the USA, 1999; a follow-up to three previous books which dealt with earlier seasons of the show, it states "Volume 4" on the cover but not on the title page; it appears to be the American first edition with a British over-sticker.) 19th July 1999.

Moon, Elizabeth. **Hunting Party: Book One of The Serrano Legacy.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-881-8, 364pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993.) 1st July 1999.

Newman, Kim. **Life's Lottery: A Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Book.** Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-684-84016-2, 488pp, hardcover, £16.99. ("Interactive" novel, first edition; proof copy received; Newman's latest opus is nothing less than a choose-you-own-outcome novel for grownups; it may well have horror elements.) 18th August 1999.

Pohl, Frederik. **Gateway.** "SF Masterworks, 9." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-818-3, 313pp,

B-format paperback, cover by Boris Vallejo, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1976; a Hugo-and Nebula award-winner in its time, this is another worthy addition to Millennium's series of classic sf titles.) June 1999.

Priest, Christopher. **The Dream Archipelago.** "First world publication." Earthlight, 0-671-03388-3, 264pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Collection of linked sf stories, first edition; this is a reworking of Priest's last collection, *An Infinite Summer* [1979], with a couple of stories dropped and three pieces, "The Equatorial Moment," "The Cremation" and "The Miraculous Cairn," added; all the texts appear to have been revised; recommended.) No date shown: received in June 1999.

Priest, Christopher. **Omnibus 1: The Space Machine & A Dream of Wessex.** Earthlight, 0-671-03389-1, 363pp & 199pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Sf omnibus, first edition; the two novels were first published separately in the UK, 1976 and 1977.) Late entry: May publication, received in June 1999.

Priest, Christopher. **Omnibus 2: Inverted World & Fugue for a Darkening Island.** Earthlight, 0-671-03390-5, 251pp & 125pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Sf omnibus, first edition; the two novels were first published separately in the UK, 1972 and 1974.) No date shown: received in June 1999.

Sawyer, Robert J. **Frameshift.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648320-8, 343pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997.) 5th July 1999.

Sheckley, Robert. **A Call to Arms.** "Babylon 5." Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-1813-1, 244pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series novelization, first published in the USA, 1999; based on a screenplay by J. Michael Straczynski; according to the accompanying publicity sheet, in 1991 Robert Sheckley "received the Daniel F. Galun Award for contributions to the genre of science fiction"; now, there was an American sf writer called Daniel F. Galouye, and there was another one called Raymond Z. Gallun [both are now deceased] – is this award named after one of them and, if so, which one?) 8th June 1999.

Sheppard, Roger. **Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror.** "A Reader's Guide." Preface by Andy Sawyer. Library Association, Career Development Group, ISBN 1-901353-01-X, xviii+416pp, trade paperback, £25. (Annotated alphabetical bibliography of sf/fantasy books by author, first edition; published by the L.A. with the assistance of Remploy Ltd; this is a useful, lightly opinionated listing, with fairly full publication details and awards annotations for each book covered; unfortunately, there are no running heads and although the print is clear the lay-

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out is rather horrible – authors' names are not made to stand out in any way; moreover, the authors' bylines are sometimes oddly or inaccurately cited – e.g. "Cathy" Acker [should be Kathy], "James G." Ballard [should be J. G.], "John C." Batchelor [should be John Calvin]; in the secondary bibliography at the back of the book, Neil Barron's name is given as "Louis" Barron, and the titles of my own books are all mis-cited; Clute & Grant's *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* is dated "1996" [should be 1997] and is annotated "not seen" [should have been seen!]; surprisingly slipshod for a work compiled by a librarian; the photographic cover illustration, which shows the spines of many books, is borrowed from *Locus*.) No date shown: received in June 1999.

Silverberg, Robert, ed. **Far Horizons: All New Tales from the Greatest Worlds of Science Fiction**. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-97630-7, 482pp, hardcover, \$27.50. (Sf anthology, first edition; the British edition [from *Orbit*], listed here last month, appears to be near-simultaneous; this one differs in that it has a non-pictorial cover and reproductions of the authors' signatures on the end-papers; all-original stories, each set in one of its creator's best-known universes, by Greg Bear, Gregory Benford, David Brin, Orson Scott Card, Joe Haldeman, Ursula Le Guin, Nancy Kress, Anne McCaffrey, Frederik Pohl and Dan Simmons – plus a story by Silverberg himself, in his "Roma Eterna" series.) Late entry: 4th May publication, received in June 1999.

Smith, Cordwainer. **The Rediscovery of Man**. "SF Masterworks, 10." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-819-1, xix+378pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA as *The Best of Cordwainer Smith*, 1975; "Cordwainer Smith" was a pseudonym of Paul M. A. Linebarger [1913-1966]; of his four sf books [as posthumously established: two collections and two episodic novels], this is the one which contains most of the essential stuff – the core stories of his strange far-future mythos; recommended.) June 1999.

Smith, Dean Wesley, and Kristine Kathryn Rusch. **Vectors: Double Helix, Book Two of Six**. "Star Trek: The Next Generation, #52." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-03256-9, 260pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1999; this is the American first edition of June 1999 with a British price added; it's based on a "concept" by John J. Ordover and Michael Jan Friedman.) 5th July 1999.

Stableford, Brian. **The Dictionary of Science Fiction Places**. Illustrated by Jeff White. Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-684-84958-5, 384pp, very large-format paperback, £12.99. (Alphabetically-arranged gazetteer to the imaginary worlds of sf, first published in the USA, 1999; it's co-copyright "The Wonderland Press" – presumably a book-packager whose idea this was; with its

three-column pages, this is a big book, and one which probably only Stableford could have written; the locales described range from Ursula Le Guin's planetoid Anarres to Clark Ashton Smith's far-future continent Zothique, with many hundreds of others along the way, all drawn from sf novels or short stories of the past century and more [but not films or TV series]; oddly, perhaps, there are almost no maps; White's illustrations are quite copious but entirely in black and white – and, frankly, not very appealing; there have been guides to sf places before, but this is by far the fullest; a curiously "useless" reference book, to be recommended for its interesting text; there is an author index at the rear.) 20th August 1999.

Stackpole, Michael A. I. **Jedi**. "Star Wars." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50602-1, viii+577pp, A-format paperback, cover by Drew Struzan, £5.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1998; this is the one, perhaps the biggest *Star Wars* novel ever, where the author, in his acknowledgments, refers to "the manic month in which this book was written"; sheesh – the fatten-out paperback is nearly 600 pages!) 8th July 1999.

Tallis, Frank. **Killing Time**. Hamish Hamilton, ISBN 0-241-14030-7, 218pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Mainstream novel with possible sf elements, first edition; a debut novel by a British writer who has published non-fiction works about psychology, it's described as "a dark, irreverent thriller which explores the tensions between science and our primitive instincts.") No date shown: received in June 1999.

Tolkien, J. R. R. **The Lord of the Rings**. Houghton Mifflin, ISBN 0-395-97468-2, xvii+1137pp, trade paperback, cover by Alan Lee, \$20. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK in three volumes, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*, 1954-55; this is the first time the complete text has appeared in the USA in a single-volume paperback [we have had one-volume paperback editions in the UK for over 20 years]; it has been published to tie in with the news that a new live-action film version is in production – "An epic motion picture trilogy coming soon from New Line Cinema"; the text follows the most recent revised edition, with redrawn maps and a four-page "Note on the Text" by Douglas A. Anderson [dated 1993]; the latter begins by pointing out what needs to be pointed out repeatedly: "The Lord of the Rings is often erroneously called a trilogy, when it is in fact a single novel.") 30th June 1999.

Tolkien, J. R. R. **Roverandom**. Edited by Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond. Houghton Mifflin, ISBN 0-395-95799-0, xxii+106pp, trade paperback, cover by the author, \$12. (Juvenile fantasy novella, first published in the UK, 1998; illustrated with five plates of drawings and paintings by the author; written for his young son in 1925, this fairy tale about a dog is described by the

publishers as "a full-length fantasy"; the actual text fills about 85 pages, and there are copious notes by the editors.) 30th June 1999.

Tolkien, J. R. R. **The Silmarillion**. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-261-10242-7, xxiv+365pp, hardcover, cover by the author, £16.99. (Fantasy collection [usually regarded as a "novel"], first published in 1977; a kind of prequel to *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*; this new edition has some minor textual revisions and contains, for the first time, a 14-page letter by Tolkien, dated 1951, in which he gives an exposition of the background of his Middle-earth and its mythology.) 19th July 1999.

Vinge, Vernor. **A Deepness in the Sky**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-825-6, 606pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £17.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1999; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 144.) 24th June 1999.

Weaver, Tom. **John Carradine: The Films**. Introductions by Joe Dante and Fred Olen Ray. Biography by Gregory William Mank. McFarland [Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640, USA], ISBN 0-7864-0607-0, xi+396pp, hardcover, \$65. (Illustrated critical study of the films of American stage-and-screen actor John Carradine; first edition; one doesn't immediately associate Carradine with fantasy movies – perhaps his finest moment was in John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* [1940], and he also appeared in other Ford movies such as *The Prisoner of Shark Island* [1936] – but as this book reminds us, in exhaustive detail, he also played Dracula and appeared in numerous other horror movies, mainly in his long twilight years; it gives the full detail of an amazing 60-year career; another nicely-produced volume from McFarland, in their larger format.) September 1999.

Whitbourn, John. **Downs-Lord Dawn: Part One of the Downs-Lord Triptych**. Earthlight, 0-671-03300-X, 346pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the publishers describe it as combining "the sweep of epic fantasy with the sly satires of Swift.") 3rd August 1999.

Williams, Tad. **River of Blue Fire: Otherland, Volume Two**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-764-1, xx+796pp, A-format paperback, cover by Michael Whelan, £6.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 139.) 29th July 1999.

Wilson, Robert Charles. **Darwinia**. "A novel of a very different twentieth century." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-815-9, 320pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998; reviewed by Brian Stableford in *Interzone* 134.) June 1999.

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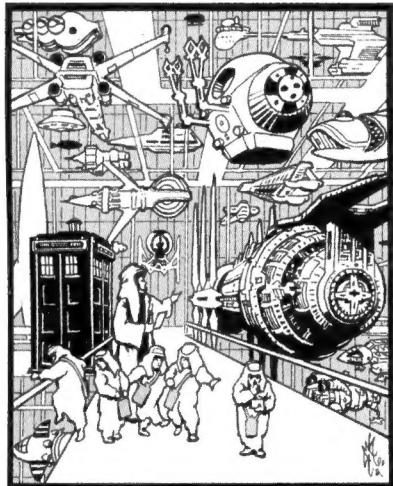
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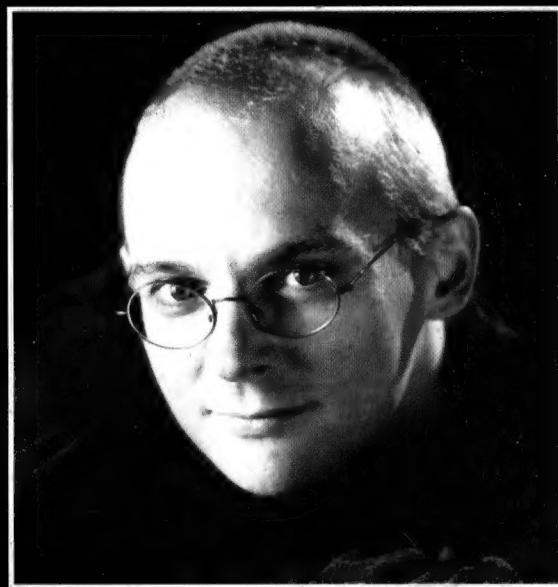
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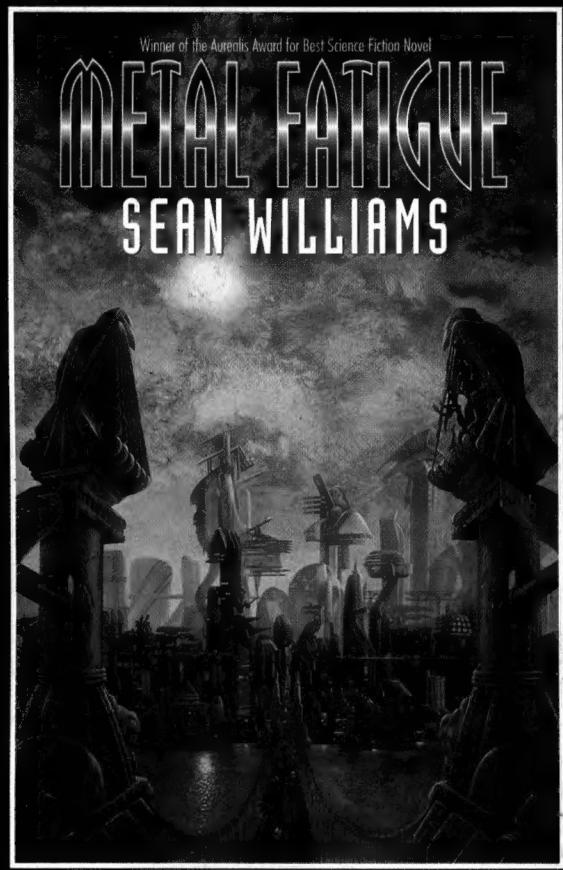
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